

Neon Liar (Hiding in Plain Sight)

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Neon Liar (Hiding in Plain Sight)

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Summary

Peter is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or more literally, he's stuck between the will of ten other teenagers and the knowledge that if anyone finds out he's living with the Avengers he can kiss his normal high school life goodbye. Can he keep it a secret from his classmates that he's living with the world's loudest superheroes? And can he keep it a secret from the Avengers that he's accidentally bringing his classmates home for a field trip?

And once he starts hiding things, keeping secrets, and lying, will he be able to stop?

And even more importantly: will *Ned* be able to keep his mouth shut long enough for

Peter's secrets to stay a secret?

At least MJ can be trusted to keep a lid on things

Notes

Haha another Field Trip fic

I can't stop, and incidentally, I won't stop

Thank you to @TMarauder101 for helping me on this title!

I'd credit the other helper too but she literally refuses to read what I write so ;)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

An All Expenses Paid Trip to... I'm sorry, Where?

"How're you doing, Peter?" Aunt May asked, the concern in her voice almost concealed by the crackly static-like quality of the Skype connection.

Peter smiled at the laggy video of his aunt, and then at his laptop's camera, so it would actually be directed at his aunt from her point of view. "I'm doing ok."

She gave him a look.

"I *am*," he insisted. "School is fine. I aced my Spanish test, and the physics mid-term, and I got a solid B minus in English, but so did everyone else." Aunt May's eyebrow rose in a single, judgmentally fluid motion. "Don't judge me," he said, "We're reading *Ethan Frome*. It's a horrible book with horrible characters and no one likes it! The only saving grace, I swear to Thor, is that it's short."

Aunt May pursed her lips. "Still," she said, "try to keep it on the higher end of the B's please. If your grade in English dips to a C then—"

"Then the school may ask for a parent-teacher conference thing," Peter said, sighing, and very manfully holding back a full eye roll. "I know. Don't worry. I'm not *that* bad."

"Uh huh," Aunt May said, sounding very much like she didn't believe him. "I trust you to keep your grades up, Peter, but you're also, ah, juggling *several* extracurriculars," her code for the fact that he liked to dress up in spandex and punch bank robbers in the face, "and I don't want it to get to be too much for you without you noticing, and then *Bam* you have all C's, or even D's, and the teacher calls me for a parent-teacher conference and I have to tell them that I can't come, because I'm in Paris."

"How *is* Paris?" Peter asked. "I hear the Eiffel tower is very nice this time of year. How are the baguettes? Have you had any fancy crepes yet?"

"Don't change the subject on me, Peter Benjamin Parker," Aunt May said with a very stern expression on her face, and just the tiniest hint of humor in the corner of her lips, that it looked like she was trying to hide. "If I tell them I'm in Paris, they're going to ask who's your acting guardian ____"

"And you would lie to them," Peter said, "because you love me very much and wouldn't want to totally ruin my life."

Aunt May smiled, and her expression was just a tad too vindictive for Peter's taste. "No. I'm going to have to tell them that your acting guardian is Tony Stark, and that he'd *love* to come in for a parent-teacher conference, and then you'd have to admit to Tony that you're not doing so well in classes and he might restrict your lab time *or* your, ehem, other extracurriculars, *and* he'd go to that parent-teacher conference and be very Tony about it." She raised both eyebrows this time. "Does that sound like a good time to you?"

Peter groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "No, Aunt May," he said.

She laughed at him, just a little. "That's what I thought you'd say," she said, "so keep your grades up."

"You're so mean to me," Peter whined. "You know if Tony thinks I'm doing bad in school he'd,

like, stage an intervention or something for me, and, like, invite *everybody* and it'd be so embarrassing! May, I would literally not survive!"

She did laugh at him then. "Peter, I'm just teasing you. I know you'd never let your grades dip badly enough to force your poor teachers into having a meeting with Tony. You aren't that cruel. To your teachers."

Peter sighed. "I know you're joking, but the fear... the fear is real, Aunt May. I mean, just living here with everybody," he gestured around his bed room, a temporary bedroom that seemed more and more like home every day, filled with posters and lego sets and furniture Tony had picked out for him, special, right in the middle of the residential area of the Avengers Compound in upstate New York, "it's kind of amazing? And terrifying. At the same time. I mean I get to *know*, like *all the Avengers*. All of them, Aunt May."

"Wow," she said, and she was definitely making fun of him now. "Getting to live with superheroes. I wonder what *that's* like."

"Ha ha," Peter said. "You didn't seem super enthused about it when you found out *you'd* been living with a super."

May's eyes widened and she looked around the room, behind Peter.

"It's fine," Peter said, hoping he sounded exasperated and not touched by her concern. "I asked FRIDAY to lock the room from outside entry. I kind of live that way now?" He shrugged. "It's amazing how little respect for personal space there is in this superhero dorm. I had Hawkeye spying on me from the vents for a whole week before I told Mr. Stark about it and he installed, like, a laser grid up there or something."

"I'm sorry," Aunt May said, sounding suddenly very serious, "a grown man was spying on my sixteen-year-old nephew? In his *bedroom*?"

"Not like that," Peter was quick to explain. "It was only during my self-imposed homework sessions, and half the time he'd talk to me from the vents, to let me know he was there. I, uh, already knew, of course." He tapped his ear.

"Supersonic heightened magical hearing," Aunt May said, "of course."

"And Steve, uh, I mean, Captain America, he likes to barge in to announce that dinner's ready, and sometimes Mr. Stark does the same to announce, like, science-time. And, it's not just me, don't worry. They all do it to each other all the time. It's kind of like what I imagine a college dorm to be like. But, I need, well, personal time."

Aunt May raised her eyebrows and turned to look at him from out of the corner of her eyes.

And, great, now he was blushing. He could feel his cheeks heating as he rewound his own words inside his head.

"Not like that!" he said, maybe a little too loudly. "Just, I— Aunt May, you know— Homework! Ok? I just want time to study in peace without anyone barging in! And— and, and— My, you know, Spidermaning! I— I'm still trying to keep a lid on that, and so far no one's figured it out—"

"Except for Tony," Aunt May pointed out.

Peter sighed. "Tony is the exception. But he's known forever! I'm better at hiding now. I just like some *privacy* May. Everyone's very nice, but I grew up with it just being you, me, and, and Ben.

And then just you and me. Not Tony and Pepper and Rhodey and Steve and Bucky and Natasha and Clint and Bruce and Sam and Thor and Wanda and Vision and Me. Not counting if any other freelance hero teams up with the Avengers for a fight and then comes back to the compound afterward to hang. I like hanging with them, honest, they're all very cool people, but I just want some me time, sometimes. I need to, like, um, decompress. So I set up a thing with FRIDAY where I get to lock my room, and she'll make sure there's no eavesdroppers or anything, and I get some, um, privacy."

Aunt May's expression looked complicated for a moment, but then she smiled (and Peter thought maybe her expression hadn't been complicated, maybe it had just been the laggy skype call) and said, "You make me wonder if maybe I shouldn't have left you with Tony after all."

"No," Peter said quickly. "No, I like it here. I really do. And it's only till summer. Where else would I have stayed anyway? It's not like you were going to leave me alone in the apartment."

"No," Aunt May said, "but I didn't *have* to go."

Peter scoffed. "Are you kidding? You get offered the chance to do a year-long world tour, and you turn it down? No way, Aunt May. You deserve that."

She smiled at him. "But you're my precious nephew! How could I have left you for a full year?"

"Because it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Peter said, the same words he'd said to her every time she'd waffled on going since she was notified that she'd won. Peter had wondered at first if Tony had pulled some strings to get her to win the drawing she'd entered on a whim over a year ago now, but when Aunt May had called Tony and asked if he could watch Peter for the year (after many, *many* hours of Peter trying to convince her that he'd be fine and that she deserved a vacation and that everything was going to be great) he'd seemed so shocked that Peter had abandoned the thought at once.

The surprise had been genuine.

And then they'd both had to convince Tony that he *could* take care of Peter, that raising a teenager wasn't as stressful as raising an infant or a dog or even a goldfish. Peter would tell Tony when he was hungry, and Peter didn't need someone to remind him to bathe himself or do his homework (he *did* need someone to remind him to sleep, but so did Tony, so they matched). Peter was pretty self-sufficient. And it'd even be *better* in some ways, because Peter would still be Spidermaning around, and with Tony being a hero himself, he could have extra support in that capacity.

And it was Tony's fault anyway that he was the best option to take up temporary guardianship of Peter while May was away. He'd come into Peter's life so abruptly, had immediately provided him with a better, safer Spiderman suit, and a place to be as much himself as he could ever want. Not to mention a place to study science and technology and work on projects and *build things*! And do it *with* someone, someone who seemed to know everything on the subject and never shot Peter down when he had a new idea. He'd become a mentor and a friend, and someone Peter knew he could trust. So really, who else *would* May leave Peter with? Tony wasn't the only option; he was merely the best one.

Introducing Peter to the rest of the Avengers had been fun. Tony, perpetually the worst at deciding what information was important to share and what information was unnecessary, had apparently told the other Avengers that he was, quote 'Going to be taking in this kid from Queens because he's going to be parentless for a while, and his, uh, guardian told me that I should "take responsibility" of him for once in my life.'

This had *apparently* implied to all of the Avengers, who all lived in the compound along with Tony and Pepper, that Tony had an illegitimate son, and that that son was moving in with Tony. And since Tony and the Avengers lived in the same... facility, that meant that that son would also be moving in with the *Avengers*.

(Pepper knew better, obviously. She'd met Peter very soon after Happy had, and, as far as Peter had known at the time, liked him. She, like, patted the top of his head in a non-patronizing sort of way sometimes, and gave him candy out of an ever refilling candy bowl if he passed by her office at SI. It was cool).

When Peter had first walked into the compound, two duffel bags and his backpack all hanging off him like he was a harried hotel bellboy instead of a new guest resident at the Avengers compound, the whole crew had been there to meet him. It had been intimidating, all of the Avengers lined up in what Peter would later learn was the formal living room (the one that photo shoots, interviews, and other Avengers PR stuff took place in. The informal living room was down a long corridor, through a metal door, and was perpetually a mess), with a big banner behind them that just said, "WELCOME!" But most of them had been smiling, and Steve (and Peter's internal freak out at meeting not just all of the Avengers but The Captain America had been no less insane for being contained inside his own head) had come over and relieved Peter of his two duffels, and had introduced himself. And then everyone else had introduced themselves as well, and Peter had belatedly, awkwardly (with Tony grinning down at him in mischievous glee), said, "Nice to meet you all too. Uh, thanks for letting me stay in your house, I'm Peter."

"Anything for Tony's son," Clint had said with such warmth and such confidence that Peter had nodded in agreement until his words fully pervaded Peter's brain.

Tony got there first. The man's mischievous expression dropped. His arms, previously crossed in front of him, fell to his sides. He sputtered. "My *son*!?" he said in a loud, incredulous voice.

"Yes," Thor said with a sage nod. "I know not the circumstances of the separation between you and young Peter's mother, and I am saddened that you have not had the chance to raise him as your own until now, but it fills me with joy that you will now have the chance to be a part of his young life."

Peter's eyes hurt from how wide they were and the lack of blinking. He gaped at Thor. It was his first time meeting the god, meeting *any* of the Avengers besides Tony, and— and *this* was the conversation they were having?

Holy moly.

"I'm not..." Peter started, and promptly lost a little steam as ten superheroes all focused their complete attention on him. He didn't like talking in front of a crowd of his peers, he *super* didn't like talking in front of a crowd of his heroes. But a quick glance at Tony showed that the man was opening and closing his mouth, soundlessly, like a fish out of water. He wasn't going to be of any help. So Peter forced himself to buck up and said, "I'm not Tony's son."

There was a minimal amount of confusion, most of it quickly hidden away again.

"Oh thank god," Rhodey said with audible relief, and Bruce nodded in agreement.

"What do you mean, 'thank god?'" Tony demanded. "I could have a son! You don't know. Peter could *definitely* be my son."

"You'd be a crap dad, Tony," Clint said with a laugh.

“I would *not*,” Tony huffed.

Peter had to agree. “I think Mr. Stark would make a great dad,” Peter said, and then shrank back a little as once again ten sets of eyes focused in on him.

“Thanks, son,” Tony said.

Peter’s eye twitched. “Please never call me that again. I *will* explode.”

Tony made a face that Peter couldn’t help but consider a pout. “You’re no fun.”

“So who *are* you?” Bucky asked, arms crossed over his chest (the metal one glinting under the room’s fluorescent lights) and not-so-friendly expression on his face.

Peter tried not to be intimidated and failed pretty fantastically, but thankfully was able to keep any possible reaction to being intimidated off his face. “I, uh, I’m, well, I’m Peter. Uh, Peter Parker.”

“Yes,” Bucky said, “That’s your name. Why are you here?”

“Bucky!” Steve hissed, and slapped lightly at Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky gave Steve a look that said, ‘What? What did I do?’

“Like I told you,” Tony said, intercepting the question, “Peter’s guardian is going to be out of town for a while, and she told me I should take responsibility for Peter and—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Peter said, turning to Tony. “Is that what you told them before?”

“Yeah,” Tony snapped in exasperation.

Peter pinched the bridge of his nose. “No wonder they thought I was your kid, Mr. Stark! ‘Take responsibility!’ May did not say that to you, that sounds like you had me out of wedlock and refused to raise me for fifteen years.”

Tony hummed, and then nodded. “I can see that.”

“Tones,” Rhodey groaned, “why are you like this?”

“He’s a monster,” Natasha offered, but it looked like she was secretly laughing at him.

“Am *not*,” Tony whined.

“What Mr. Stark *should* have said,” Peter interjected, “was that my Aunt is going on a year-long world tour and needed someone to be a temporary guardian in the meanwhile. We are not related to Mr. Stark and he is *not* my dad.”

“He’s a babysitter!” Clint crowed.

“Nay,” Thor said. “Our glorious comrade-in-arms, Iron Man, would not sit on the newly born. He is not cruel, and he knows how devastating such an action would be. He is good, Clint. He would not slay children in such a way.”

“No, Thor,” Sam said with a sigh. “Babysitting is when someone looks after a kid who isn’t their own kid. Tony’s babysitting this, uh, Peter.”

Peter scowled at Sam, and at Clint. “I’m old enough not to need a babysitter.”

“Oh yeah?” Clint asked. “Then why does Tony have to watch over you? Why can’t you just live alone for a year?”

Peter scowled at him. “I’m not incompetent. It’s just, you know, illegal.”

“Stop teasing my new ward,” Tony chided loudly.

“Yes,” Steve agreed, “no more teasing.”

Clint sighed very dramatically. “Fine!” He sighed. “You never let me have any fun.”

“But why Stark?” Wanda asked. She’d stayed silent until now except for a quick introduction, but now she spoke up. “If, as you said, Tony is not related to you, why would your aunt leave you in his care? How do you know each other?”

Tony actually laughed at that. A light, breezy noise. “Oh! I never told you?” He wrapped an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “Peter here’s my intern!”

Which was technically true. When he wasn’t out Spidermaning, and he wasn’t staying in for the night with Aunt May, he was in the lab with Tony. It wasn’t really an *internship* in the classic sense. The internship thing had been a ruse for the Spider-man thing, and the need for that little make-believe had disappeared as soon as Aunt May found out, but still, Peter liked to help Tony out in the lab, he liked listening to the man’s explanations of tech, and he liked learning new things from the genius— because Tony *was* a certifiable genius. And Peter didn’t really know much about what constituted an internship, but he was under the impression that it involved more gophering and doing menial tasks (which he never did) and less helping Tony rebuild the Iron Man suit every time it got beat up (which he ended up doing three out of four times he swung by the lab).

The look the other Avengers gave the two of them, but mostly Tony, ranged from incredulous to scared.

“You have an *intern*?” Clint demanded, agog.

“Tony,” Rhodey sighed, “why would you need an intern? You’ve got U and Butterfingers to get you coffee or your wretched kale smoothies, FRIDAY reminds you when to eat and sleep and reads your emails for you. Your whole lab is automated, why would you *need* an intern?”

“Oh,” Bruce said (and Peter tried to keep his fanboy screaming internal— Dr. Bruce Banner!!!) “so *this* is the kid who’s always in your lab?” Bruce tilted his head to the side. “I thought he was part of some mentoring program or something. You always seem to be having him work on your tech.”

“Well, it *is* more like a mentor-thingy,” Tony admitted, at the same time that Rhodey said:

“Hey! How do *you* know the kid?!” He turned from Bruce to Tony. “How long have you had an Intern?!”

Tony blinked at Rhodey. “Honeybear, are you *jealous*?”

“No,” Rhodey snapped. “I just don’t know why you hid the fact that you had an *intern* from literally everyone but Bruce.”

“In his defense,” Bruce said, “he didn’t tell me either, I just happen to pass by his lab more often than anyone else since it’s on the way to *my* lab.”

“That doesn’t seem like a good defense at all,” Natasha said. She still looked like she was silently laughing at all of them. Peter got the feeling he didn’t want to be on her bad side.

“Ms. Potts knows,” Peter said. “And Happy drives me home sometimes.”

Rhodey sighed, and in a monotone said, “Of course he does.”

“I’m confused,” Vision said. He’d been as quiet as Wanda, and she looked surprised to see him speaking up. “The definition of intern, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is: an advanced student or graduate usually in a professional field such as medicine or teaching, gaining supervised practical experience, as in a hospital or classroom. I would not think that the employer of the intern would offer to house said intern for a full calendar year. Is the definition wrong?”

“No, that sounds about right,” Bruce said.

“Why *is* your intern living with us now?” Sam asked, and then turning to Peter, he said, “No offence.”

“None taken,” Peter said with a shrug.

Tony squinted into the middle distance. “Why... is Peter living with us? I’m pretty sure I’ve covered that *several* times now, but ok. His guardian is going abroad and he needs a place to stay.”

“We get that,” Rhodey said, sounding frustrated. “The question is, why would his mom or whoever —”

“Aunt,” Peter offered.

“Ok,” Rhodey said, “aunt. Why would his aunt go to *you*? How are you, his *boss*, the person who would have guardianship over him? Do you understand what I’m asking you Tony? We get how you know him, we get that he’s your intern. But why would a woman who’s going out of town think to herself, ‘I need a place for my nephew to stay for a *year*. I’m going to ask his employer.’”

Put like that, Peter could understand the confusion. It was just, well, Tony was... this sounded hokey even in his own head, but Tony was *there* for him. Tony reached out and offered help when Tony didn’t even *know* him, and continued to help him, and be there for him, and just... be a good person. Peter loved hanging out with the man, in the lab and at the dinner table. Conversations were never stilted, Tony always wanted to hear what Peter had to say, and Tony *respected* Peter’s opinions, and there was just so much that made Tony a perfect... mentor. A perfect friend. In the deep recesses of his mind he could admit that Tony reminded him of Ben. Not personality-wise. Uncle Ben’s personality was *nothing* like Tony’s but Tony was there for Peter in the same way Ben and May were, and, and, and... what else was there to say?

It wasn’t even that Tony was the last option. He was the best one. Peter’s favorite choice.

Peter looked at Tony and Tony looked back with eyes that were wider than normal, and Peter realized that Tony was coming to the same conclusion. Never had Tony thought it was weird that May would ask *him* to take care of Peter. He’d objected at first because he didn’t want to ‘do parenting wrong’ (his words), and he wasn’t sure if he’d make a good guardian, *not* because he thought it was weird, or not appropriate, for Tony, as Peter’s boss, to become his guardian.

They stared at each other, neither of them knowing how to answer that in a way that would make the other people in the room understand.

Tony wasn’t usually at a loss for words, and the oddness of this scenario was obviously weighing

on the other Avengers. Clint started fidgeting and Natasha went completely still. Wanda stepped slightly in front of Vision. Sam squinted at the two of them. And most telling, perhaps, was Rhodey, who groaned loudly and said, “Whatever it is, man, just spit it out. I don’t like it when you go all zipped lips on me.”

Tony opened his mouth, obviously ran through the scenarios again in his head, and shrugged. “I mean, he’s my intern.”

“Yeah?” Bruce asked gently, his voice a judgementless prompt to continue.

Peter and Tony exchanged glances again. Peter shrugged at Tony. Tony shrugged back.

“That’s, like, literally it though,” Peter said. “I’m his intern. I spend a lot of after-school time in his lab. I help him fix stuff.”

“Kid’s a genius,” Tony bragged.

“Shut up,” Peter said, used to brushing off the gentle teasing by now. “We just, I don’t know, my aunt trusts Mr. Stark enough to let me wield a soldering gun and a blow torch under his supervision. Why wouldn’t she trust him enough to just, like, keep me fed and make sure I wake up in time to go to school.”

“Which reminds me,” Tony said, “FRIDAY, set an alarm for Peter. Every weekday, nine A-M.”

“Yes Boss,” Friday said, just as Peter was saying, “Belay that order, FRIDAY. That’s much too late.” He turned to Tony. “You know school starts at, like, 8:15. And it takes, what, two hours to get there from here?” The sudden realization at how early Peter was going to have to wake up hit him and he groaned, and dramatically dropped his head in his hands.

“I’d give it at least two and a half hours,” Tony said cheerfully, “considering the morning rush hour. Preferably three.”

“So I’d have to leave here at 5:15?” Peter asked, dread pulling in his gut. How was he going to deal with that? How could he possibly leave every morning at 5:15? He’d have to quit being Spiderman. He couldn’t possibly go out saving the day, and then, what, web all the way back to the compound? *And* do homework and get enough sleep to wake up at, *fuck*, 4 in the morning??? Really? He was going to die!

Peter groaned again.

“There, there, Pete,” Tony said jovially, and ruffled the boy’s hair. “4 AM’s not horrible.”

“You only think you know that,” Peter said, “because you’re still *up* at that point.” He chewed on his bottom lip. “Is Happy going to kill me if I ask him to drive me to school that early?”

Tony laughed, and then very boisterously said, “Yes!”

Peter checked his watch. “Well, um, can you show me my room? I think if I have to get up at 4 in the morning I should probably get to bed now, so I can get enough sleep.”

“It is only an hour past noon,” Thor said.

“I know,” Peter said drearily.

“And a Saturday,” Rhodey pointed out.

"I know," Peter said again.

"What if I fly you there every morning?" Tony offered. "Wouldn't you be the coolest kid in school if Iron Man dropped you off every morning?"

"Please don't," Peter said.

"So you *don't* want a ride?" Tony asked, making his face into something very dramatically confused just to mess with Peter.

"I'd almost rather have to get up at 4 every morning just to avoid having to deal with the fallout of anyone at school figuring out I live with and/or *know* Tony Stark."

"You wound me," Tony said, laying a hand against the arc reactor in his chest, which glowed a pleasant electric blue through the man's thin Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

"Listen, Mr. Stark," Peter said, "we've been over this. I want zero, and I mean, *zero*, attention. I don't want kids coming after me asking for your autograph, I don't want to have to explain to anyone that I somehow got an internship with you even though I'm hella young."

"Language," Tony teased.

Peter rolled his eyes.

"I don't want my high school life to get any more complicated than it already is," he said. "You must remember high school, right Mr. Stark? You're not that old."

"Watch it," Tony warned in a stern voice, though he couldn't hide the twitch of a smile at his lips.

"The best way to survive high school is to *not* stand out," Peter said, "and the worst way to not stand out is to have a superhero deliver you to school every morning. I would stand out *very badly*. And that, Mr. Stark," he said with far too much drama, "would *ruin me*."

Tony laughed at him again.

"Fine," Tony said, mirth still evident in his voice. "What if I fly you there *very stealthily* and no one will know you actually live with the coolest person in the world."

Peter made his eyes very big and tried to look as innocent as possible as he asked Tony, "Do you mean Dr. Banner?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "You're such a troll, kid. Do you want the ride or not?"

"Only if you don't mind having to get up at early o'clock in the morning."

"With me flying we can be there in twenty minutes, and I don't have to be *that* awake to pilot the suit. I can just roll out of bed at 7:30 and still get you there in time for homeroom."

"I would really like it," Steve said, "if you were very awake while flying a massive suit of armor across the state of New York, especially with a teenager on board."

"I'm not worried," Peter said. "He'd probably *still* be awake from the night before."

"What can I say?" Tony asked, "I'm a night owl."

"I'd be a night owl too," Peter complained, "if I didn't have school at stupid o'clock AM."

“Are you sure,” Rhodey interjected, looking at Tony with a very serious expression on his face, “that he is not your kid?”

“If I pretend he is,” Tony retorted, “would you all stop haranguing me about it?”

“Yes,” Wanda said, her voice cautiously sly, like she was getting back in the habit of being a little mischievous.

Tony waved his hands very grandly about his person and said, with much pomp and circumstance, “Then I’d like to introduce you all to my son, Peter Stark.”

“Huzzah!” Thor boomed.

Wanda cheered a little, cheekily, and Clint jumped forward to give Peter a high-five, which Peter returned very awkwardly.

From there it devolved pretty heavily into a big joke fest, and Peter ended up not getting his bags to his new room for *several* more hours. But before he went to bed that night he realized, laying in this new room, with its large desk and large bed and undecorated walls, left bare for him to add his mark to them, that he felt way more comfortable with this situation than he’d expected. As much as he’d tried to convince Aunt May that he was fine with her leaving, and that she deserved a vacation, and that Tony could take care of him for a year, he’d still worried. Not that he’d start to hate living with Tony, or start hating Tony himself (*that*, he was absolutely certain, would *never* happen), or that he wouldn’t be able to live without Aunt May (he’d miss her— of course he would, but she was always going to be only a skype call away). No, he’d worried that it would be awkward living with the *other* Avengers. He knew Tony, and trusted him, and he knew and trusted Pepper as well, and Happy, but he’d never met any of the other heroes, (except for when he was out in his Spiderman suit, and even then, any interactions had been short and fleeting), and he didn’t know if he’d like them, or get along with them. He didn’t know if his own— he wouldn’t call it hero-worship, because it wasn’t, but, uh, his own admiration of the heroes would be proven wrong. He just didn’t *know*.

Or, he *hadn’t* known. Now he did. Spending the afternoon with the other heroes, his— Hah!—his new roommates had shown that they were all pretty likable, and pretty cool, and pretty funny. He was confident they’d get along.

And he was right. Living at the compound was easy. It didn’t take long for Peter to get into the swing of things at the compound. Tony took him to school every morning in the Iron Man suit (dropping him off secretly, and out of sight from any bystanders and fellow classmates), and then when Tony couldn’t do it a few times (SI travel reasons and then destroying HYDRA cell reason) Rhodey stepped up, and then it became normal for all of the flying heroes to decide the night before who was going to take Peter the next day. (Peter tried, at first, to say he didn’t want to impose, but literally no one took that at all).

After school, and after the after-school Academic Decathlon meet-ups, half the time Peter went out as Spiderman and Tony met him in the city later that night (or earlier if Tony thought Peter was going too hard that week in particular), and the other half of the time Peter made his way to the tower in the city that Tony still owned, where Stark Industries was located (either by web, by subway, or by Happy’s chauffeuring), and split his time between doing his homework in Tony’s lab as Tony worked, or helping Tony with whatever the man was working on. And then somehow that devolved into Tony giving Peter his own projects to work on (Stark Industries R&D projects mostly, as Avengers tech was usually kept at the compound’s lab, but sometimes Tony bought something with him to the tower to work on. Honestly, it didn’t seem to matter to Tony what *kind* of project he gave Peter to work on. Tony gave him anything), and then Peter proposing new ideas

himself. When Tony Stark had knocked on his door and admitted he knew Peter was Spiderman, and created the cover of Peter being Tony's intern, Peter had never expected to really, truly be working with the man in an internship-like capacity.

It kind of blew his mind, even now, to think about it. But he never spoke that thought aloud, or the thought that really he didn't deserve to be there, that it should be someone smarter helping Tony out, working with the genius, and that the only reason Peter was even there was because circumstances worked out in his favor. He never told Tony that he thought his internship wasn't fair—not to him, but to any of the other kids out there who should be there instead of him, who deserved it more. Peter never spoke any of these thoughts aloud. Part of it was because he knew Tony would start going off about how Peter *was* a genius, and a great scientist, and that Peter *did* deserve it, blah blah blah. But a smaller part, way down deep, buried in the back of Peter's brain, worried that Tony *wouldn't* disagree with Peter, and that thought—that, that *possibility*, was so much worse. So Peter kept those thoughts locked up tight, and focused, whenever those thoughts intruded, in working harder, working *smarter*, on whatever project was in front of him to prove, if only to himself, that he *could* belong here.

In the evenings, after one of Peter's extracurricular activities (either his actual internship, or the reason the internship idea was invented in the first place) Tony drove Peter back to the compound, and they had dinner with the Avengers, or whatever Avengers were available, in a big family-style setting that warmed Peter each time they all sat down together. And afterwards, well, afterwards he was at home, and sometimes they had big Avengers movie nights all circled around the TV, and sometimes they'd all just sit in the same room, spread out on couches and tables and chairs and on the carpet, each doing separate activities, and Peter would do his homework or read or fiddle with whatever gadget Tony had let him bring home from the lab that day or play on his phone, and sometimes him and Tony would go down to the lab that Tony had at the compound (because Tony needed a lab in any building he had to spend more than three hours a day in) and they'd work on more projects, and joke around, and sometimes one or more Avengers would stop by and hang out and occupy themselves in the same space as Tony and Peter, and it was *nice*.

It was home.

Not that Peter didn't miss Aunt May. He missed her every day, and he *did* miss their apartment, and he missed being able to invite Ned over (an unspoken rule: when Ned and Peter hung out after school or on weekends they either went to Ned's place or some external place, like a coffee shop or a museum). But still, the compound was home, and funnily enough, the Avengers were all almost more like an extended family than just people he had to live with.

But even with family sometimes he wanted some alone time. To do homework in his room, or just have the space to think, to breathe, and to work on projects that no one but Tony knew about—projects that had to do with a certain Friendly Neighborhood Spiderman's tech upgrades. Thus the agreement with FRIDAY.

He focused once more on Aunt May, who was still looking concerned through the laggy skype connection. "I'm fine," he told her. "You don't have to worry about leaving me here. Focus on having a fun time in Paris. I'm fine here. I'm—I'm happy," he said, and smiled when he realized that that was the pure, unadulterated truth.

May's expression softened. "Okay. If you say so. But you have to let me know if *anything* happens."

Peter nodded. "Of course."

"I mean it," May said.

“I know,” Peter said with a laugh, “but really, it’s fine. It’s *good*. I like it here. Now that Clint knows to leave me alone when the door’s closed I feel right at home.”

May smiled. “Good. Now, about *school*—”

“What *about* school?” Peter nearly whined. “I already promised I’d get my grade in English up. I’m doing *great* in Physics and Chemistry and Spanish.”

“Did I ever tell you how humble you are?” May asked cheekily.

“Ha ha,” Peter said.

“But what about the Decathlon?” May asked.

“Oh,” Peter said, “that’s fine. MJ’s a taskmaster, but she’s good at what she’s doing. She says because next year’s our senior year we have to start trying even harder, but like, we keep acing our practice meets. I don’t know how much better we can be.”

May laughed. “Well that’s good to hear. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, yes,” Peter said, “now stop stringing me along! What’s Paris like?”

“Oh!” May said, a notable excitement in her voice, “It’s amazing! Peter, you’d love it!”

In which the plot is introduced

Chapter Notes

Vague warnings and apologies:

I'm sorry in advance for the fact that

1. I tried (for some reason) to have a few sentences in Italian. I don't know Italian.
2. I don't know anything about how Academic Decathlon works, and I didn't research because I... didn't want to? idk
3. Weird chapter title

Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“How’s your Aunt?” Tony asked as soon as Peter stepped into Tony’s lab. Tony hadn’t even looked up at Peter as he entered the room, focusing instead on altering the mock-up for Natasha’s new Widow bites. The ones she had were too fragile for how harshly Nat treated them in the field, and she kept breaking them, so Tony (and Peter when he had a free moment from working on *his* latest project: upgrading Sam’s wings) was upgrading them.

“How do you know I was talking to May?” Peter asked. He narrowed his eyes dramatically. “Were you spying on me? FRIDAY! Have you betrayed me?”

“Not at all,” FRIDAY said amicably.

Tony finally looked up and rolled his eyes at Peter. “I didn’t have to spy to know that. You were in your room in lockdown for hours, but I know you finished all your upcoming homework at the tower earlier, so, what else could you be doing in there for that long? May’s in Paris now, isn’t she?”

Peter nodded.

“She like it?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “A lot actually. She said she’s going to send me all the pictures of dogs she took when she was walking down the, uh, Rue de Ravioli?”

“Rue de Rivoli,” Tony corrected.

“Yeah,” Peter said, “that.”

“I’m going to teach you French,” Tony said. “That was horrendous.”

“Well, sorry for taking Spanish when almost 15% of the country knows it fluently. 25% in New York. When am I going to ever need to know French?” Peter asked.

“When you go to France,” Tony said. “And while I’m at it, let’s add Italian.”

“Why?” Peter groaned. He really didn’t want any more homework than he already had. And then: “Wait, do you know Italian?”

Tony blinked at him. “*Se so l’italiano? Tu che ne pensi?*”

Peter perked up. “I almost got that! Is *So* like the Spanish *Saber*? You asked if you know Italian, right? Do I know Italian? I assume *l’italiano* is Italian. Italian’s a lot like Spanish, huh?”

Tony reared back, offended. “How dare you! Italian and Spanish are *nothing* alike.”

“Well,” Peter said, “they’re both romance languages, right?”

“Just for that I’m going to get Natasha to teach you Russian,” Tony said.

“Stop, please,” Peter complained. “I don’t have time for learning three *more* languages!”

“We’ll see,” Tony said in a tone that meant, ‘You’re going to end up doing it.’

Peter sighed and threw himself into a chair at a work table across the room from Tony’s, facing the man.

“Still working on Falcon’s Wings?” Tony asked as Peter pulled up his own table’s holographic blueprints. The wings spread out in front of him in electric blue light.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “Sam keeps complaining that they’re sticking. A tiny lag when he tries to extend them. Nothing dangerous, but in a spur-of-the-moment thing he’s going to need them to react immediately.”

“Right you are,” Tony said, already focusing back on his own blueprints.

Peter hummed and got to work, losing himself in the planning and execution, and the few times he remembered to look up from his work, he saw Tony doing the same. An evening when Peter got to chat with Aunt May *and* got to work on his own projects in Tony’s lab after dinner? It was like a stress void. It just ate any stress Peter could possibly have—just swallowed it, making the stress literally disappear. It was amazing.

Some time later (who knows how long? Time tended to disappear when Peter was working in *any* of Tony’s labs. They were all liminal spaces as far as he was concerned) Peter found himself dragging his eyes away from the wing blueprints as the doors to the lab slid open. It was the noise of high heels clipping against tile floors, he realized, that had caught his attention and pulled him away from his project (almost ready for fabrication, just a *few* more tweaks— and maybe he’d made a few more adjustments than just for the sticking issue, but, well, Sam wouldn’t mind, right?). And there she was, the owner of said heels, Pepper Potts, walking through the door with a bundle of files in her arms and a warm smile on her lips.

“Wow,” she said, as she walked, “I can actually hear myself think. What’s with the lack of music lately?”

Tony’s habit of blasting AC/DC and Led Zeppelin was well-known to Peter, but he’d never blown out the speakers in Peter’s hearing. Peter was pretty sure it was because Tony knew the loud noises would be hell for him and his heightened senses, but they’d never spoken about it.

“Huh?” Tony asked, raising his head, his eyes slightly unfocused, like he was waking from a dream. “Oh,” he said, with more clarity upon seeing Pepper striding toward him. “Hey, Pep. What’s up?” He tilted his face up for a kiss when she got to his side. Pepper provided. “I can’t usually get you down here when me and Peter are sciencing it up.”

“For good reason,” Pepper said. “I’m not a fan of just sitting by and watching you two work in your

own respective dazes.”

That wasn’t fair. “Sometimes we talk to each other,” Peter said.

“Sure,” Pepper said, “when you’re arms deep in a car engine or pulling apart SI tech by hand. But when you’re down here, eyeballs-deep in floating blueprints? No. It’s like trying to take part in a conversation with two coma patients.”

“Thank you for that, dear,” Tony said wryly.

She leaned down to give him another peck on the lips.

“So you came down here to tell us we’re nearly catatonic?” Peter asked.

“No,” Pepper said. “I’m just delivering these to my boss.” And then she dumped the file folders on Tony’s table.

“I’m not your boss,” Tony said. “I appointed *you* CEO of Stark Industries. You’re, um, *my* boss.”

“If I’m your boss,” she queried, “then why am I resorting to hand-delivering you files you need to read-through and sign?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “Is this a trick question? It sounds like a trick question.”

“It’s because your *current* Personal Assistant,” she gestured to Peter, who squawked at suddenly being pulled into this conversation, and also at being called a Personal Assistant, “is as bad as his boss and gets lost in his head and his projects at all hours of the day and night.”

“Hey,” Peter said. “I’m not a personal assistant! I’m just an intern.”

Pepper gave him a very sarcastic, ‘*Sure* you are,’ look and declined to respond. Instead she turned back to Tony and said, “And anyway, this isn’t for SI. This is Avengers stuff.”

“Then you should give it to Steve,” Tony said, pushing the file folders closer to Pepper. She pushed them back.

“You’re as much a leader on the team as Steve is,” Pepper said, “and unfortunately for you, you still technically own this building, and financially back the superheroes who live here, and thus *you* get to make the final decision on who gets to visit and how.”

“Someone’s visiting?” Peter asked curiously.

“Great question,” Tony said, he looked Pepper in the eye. “Someone’s visiting?”

Pepper rolled her eyes, sighed, and put a hand behind her head to work the elastic band out of her hair. She combed her manicured fingers through the creased locks, and in short work her professional and strict-looking ponytail was gone, leaving her hair to hang loose around her shoulders. A sign Peter was now very used to, that Pepper was officially off the clock. She continued raking her fingers through her hair, combing the strands into something that looked less like a lion’s mane and more like something presentable, and then with first one step forward and then another, lost four inches of height as she stepped out of her heels.

“Please, Tony,” she said, rounding the man in question and plopping herself down in a rolly chair on the other side of him. “I need you to pay attention to these things. The competition?”

“What competition?” Peter asked.

“Yes,” Tony said, but this time with a glint of mischief in his eyes, “*what* competition?”

“Peter,” Pepper said kindly, “please don’t encourage him.”

“But I want to know,” Peter said.

Pepper gave Tony an encouraging look, and he broke with a laugh. “Sorry, yeah, ok.” He laughed again. “It’s really nothing, Pete,” Tony said. “It’ll probably end up happening when you’re at school anyway, but, uh, our PR team thought it’d be a good idea to try to, I don’t know, humanize the Avengers a little? They say we’re too much Doom and Destruction. *I* say that’d make a good band name, but hey, what do I know?”

Peter frowned. “I think that’d make a pretty *bad* band name, actually. What were you thinking? Death metal? Screamo? Very cliché. I don’t like it.”

“You’re fired,” Tony said pleasantly, and then continued, not even waiting for a response from Peter who tended to get fired at least once a day, oftentimes more than that. “So they came up with this little competition. Different clubs and organizations can compete and the winner gets a tour of the facilities here, and the whole thing will be publicized. Good for PR.”

Peter rolled that idea around in his head. “So, what, like, a high school club? Or do you mean like the Girl Scouts? Or...” he trailed off.

“Any of those really,” Pepper said. “We were originally aiming for just college clubs and organizations, but ultimately decided to leave the definition more open-ended. We want to give any group an opportunity to compete. So: girl scouts, boy scouts, amateur sports teams, college clubs, high school clubs—”

“Heck,” Tony interjected, “we’d take a homeroom class that all banded together to compete. We’re not really picky here.”

“Ok,” Peter said slowly, “and then the winning group will get to tour the compound?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “We’ll probably invite a journalist to come along as well.”

“We’re thinking someone from Time, or maybe People magazine,” Pepper said.

“Those,” Peter pointed out, “are two very *different* publications.”

Pepper shrugged. “We’re still figuring it out,” she said. “We just want a good human interest piece.”

“Ok,” Peter said weakly. This whole endeavor seemed ill-planned. “What if whoever wins is, I don’t know, a bad guy in disguise? Wouldn’t this be the perfect cover to get access to the Avenger’s private compound? This place isn’t exactly open to the public.”

“The chosen club will be thoroughly vetted,” Pepper reassured.

“And, uh, just one group will win?” Peter asked. “I can’t imagine how many people will compete. *Everyone’s* going to want in on this. I mean, *The Avengers Compound*. You’re going to be overwhelmed.” He shook his head. “What kind of contest is it going to be anyway?”

“That’s a good idea, actually,” Pepper said, reaching past Tony to snag a file folder, and opening it to make a small notation on the inside cover with a pen she stole from a mug on the table, “multiple winners. Maybe make this an annual thing. Or an on-going thing? Maybe, four tours a year? That

way we'll give everyone an opportunity to win."

Tony ignored her scribbling and grinned at Peter. "The competition, Pete?" the man asked, "It's just an essay contest."

Peter rolled his eyes. "Oh my god. Tony! Who's going to read all of those?" Tony gave him a pointed look. "Me?" he asked, his voice rising several octaves.

"I'm just joshing you," Tony said. "The essays will be read by, and the winner chosen by, us, the Avengers. We're all going to take turns reading the essays— blind, of course. One of Pepper's minions will have the honor of making sure any reference to what club wrote what essay being completely eradicated. Any essay we think is winner-worthy will be read by the other Avengers, and the winner chosen that way."

"That," Peter said slowly, "makes sense. That way if someone's not sure there'll always be someone else to weed out the less-than-perfect ones."

"Like Natasha," Pepper said, having finished her notation in the folder.

"Like Natasha," Peter agreed.

"Hey," Tony said. "What about me? I can be tough if it calls for it."

Pepper and Peter exchanged a glance. "He's a soft touch," Pepper said, and Peter nodded in solemn agreement.

"Hey!" Tony yelped again, and was promptly ignored.

"But really," Pepper told Peter, "it's nothing to worry about. The tour is a ways off, and when it happens, like Tony said, it'll probably be during school hours anyway. You won't have to deal with strangers tromping through your workspace."

Peter's eyebrows shot up at that. "Do you expect to include the lab in the tour?"

Tony shrugged. "Pretty much. It's an all-expense paid trip to the Avengers Compound. We're not going to shirk on the tour."

"We're probably even going to include the common living areas," Pepper said. "At the very least, the formal living room."

The room that looked like a living room but wasn't the one everyone used when they wanted to hang. The formal living room (which Peter had taken to calling 'the dying room' much to Tony's delight, since it was, in essence the opposite of the normal, informal *living* room everyone used) was always perfectly decorated and pristine, and was the one photographers and interviewers used when they wanted a shot of an Avenger in their own home, being mundane or whatever. The real living room, the *living* room, was much more *them*— but also extremely messy and frankly, a hazard. If Peter was being honest, the dying room was a better fit for a tour to be led through (better for PR, certainly, and also the sanity of anyone who would ever try and get the mass of heroes who lived in this building to consistently clean up after themselves), but it was only a single hallway away from the living room, and from there, only a slightly longer hallway away from some of the bedrooms, including Tony and Pepper's suite, and Peter's own room.

Peter made a face.

"Oh," she said, "don't worry about any of your belongings. We'll of course give ample warning for

everyone to relocate their personal items to their own rooms before strangers start barging through our home. Our individual rooms *won't* be a part of the tour."

"Obviously," Tony tacked on.

"I'm not worried about people touching my stuff," Peter said. "Well actually, I mean, that is a concern, I guess. I'm still more concerned about giving people who possibly have some sort of grudge against the Avengers access to the Avengers private living areas. That seems like a bad idea."

"*Very* thoroughly vetted," Pepper reiterated.

Peter sighed. "Alright. If you trust the vetters, I'll trust them too."

"Vetters," Tony repeated, and laughed.

Pepper rolled her eyes, and then thunked the stack of files with a knuckle. "Either way, before we can even start going through the essays we have to go through the final rules and regulations, and run them past legal. So Tony, I *will* need these read and signed, or notated and returned, before noon tomorrow."

"Aw, Pep!" Tony complained. "But there are so many!"

"Then you better start now," she said, unsympathetically. She got to her feet and bent down to grab her high heels before starting towards the door.

"Where are *you* going?" Tony called.

"*I'm* off the clock, Mr. Stark," she said. "I'll be in our room when you're done. Assuming you finish."

Tony sighed. "Yes, Ms. Potts."

She gave a jaunty wave and then paused at the door. She checked her watch. "And you, Peter," she started.

Peter's spine cracked with how fast he straightened up in his seat. "Me?" he asked.

"Yes, you, Peter," Pepper said. "It *is* a school night. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Peter furrowed his brow. "It can't be *that* late, can it?" He checked the time on his phone and found that it was, in fact, that late. "Holy heck," he said.

Pepper laughed at him. "That's what I thought you'd say," she said, and then wandered off.

Tony and Peter looked at each other, and then almost simultaneously they both sighed. Peter pointed at the door. Tony pointed at the files.

"See you tomorrow morning?" Peter asked.

Tony nodded.

"Do you want me to ask Rhodey to take me to school?" he asked.

"No," Tony said with a sigh. "I'll still be up."

Peter rounded the tables between them to give Tony a patronizing pat on the head. “There, there, Mr. Stark.”

Tony didn’t even address the patronization. “What did I say about calling me Mr. Stark at home? I’ll deal with it at the tower because you’re *technically* my intern. But here?”

“Fine,” Peter said, and patted Tony once more on the top of his head. “There, there, Tony. Is that better?”

“Yes,” Tony said and then pulled the folder Pepper had taken notes in closer and flipped it open. “G’night, Kid.”

“Good night Tony,” Peter said. He got a few steps towards the door to the lab before stopping. “Hey,” he said, and immediately Tony’s head came up, eyes refocusing on Peter. “What’s the prompt?”

“The prompt?” Tony questioned.

“For the essay,” Peter clarified.

“Oh,” Tony said. He scratched at his beard. “I can’t remember at the moment.” He cut a sly glance at Peter. “I’ll send you the link with the instructions if you’re interested.”

Peter made a face. “What? To win a tour of my own *house*? That’s insane and bizarre. No thank you.”

Tony laughed. “Alright then,” he said, “see you tomorrow, Peter.”

“Bright and early,” Peter agreed gloomily, and exited the room to the sound of Tony’s laughter.

“Any questions?” MJ asked the assembled students the next afternoon. The Academic Decathlon’s latest practice match had just wrapped up (with Ned and Abe’s team winning against Flash and Sally’s by a very close margin), and everyone was pretty happy with how well they’d been doing. They had a competition in two weeks and Peter was confident that they’d do well. Even if they didn’t win, they’d have tried their best, and their best was pretty damn good.

No one raised their hands (normal) and Peter started packing his backpack back up, thinking that must be it, when, surprisingly, he saw in his peripheral vision a hand shoot into the air.

It was Abe.

MJ called on him with a professionalism that hid her surprise. Or at least, Peter *assumed* she was surprised. Peter was surprised. Usually everyone was so ready to leave by this point in the meeting that MJ’s last ‘Any questions?’ went completely unanswered.

“Uh,” Abe said, “I think that we should do something fun to celebrate if we win.”

“When we win!” Cindy corrected.

“No parties,” Mr. Harrington said, sounding emotionally dead and physically exhausted.

“What kind of thing?” Charles asked.

“And what do you mean: win?” Sally asked. “Like, win this upcoming meet? Win finals? Like...?”

Abe shook his head. “I don’t know. I just think we should do something *fun* as a reward.” Mr. Harrington frowned. “Or incentive! We haven’t done anything fun since DC, and, well, that trip went kinda wrong.”

“It was bad,” Sally agreed.

“And this year all of the meets and competitions take place in the city,” Abe complained. “So no more field trips.”

“It was designed like that purposefully,” Mr. Harrington said. “I didn’t want any of my students dying while I was chaperone.” He wiped at his brow. “I’m still not over DC. The elevator... that Spider thing.”

“Spiderman,” Flash snapped. “He saved our lives!” He shrugged then, trying to be nonchalant. “He’s, uh, pretty cool.”

Peter had to turn his face away from the class because he didn’t know what kind of expression his face was making at the moment, but it didn’t feel *right*.

Ugh, Flash.

“Either way,” Mr. Harrington, “no out-of-state field trips for us for a *loooong* time.”

The class groaned.

“C’mon, Mr. Harrington,” Charles said. “Can’t we do *something* fun?”

Mr. Harrington sighed, and then said nothing for a long moment. After too long of a wait he finally said, “Fine. But if we’re going to convince the principal and the school board to let us do this *fun thing*, then it needs to be extremely cheap, preferably free, and in the state, preferably the city. Alright? Any expenses will probably have to go to your parents, so keep that in mind.”

“We could just have a potluck,” Ned offered. “We had one in Spanish class last week and it was a lot of fun!”

“No parties,” Mr. Harrington said.

“That’s not a party,” Ned said, “that’s a potluck.”

“Since we run after normal school hours,” Mr. Harrington said, “we have rules that maybe don’t apply in the normal classroom. No. Parties.”

Ned leaned closer to Peter and whispered, “I think he’s just making that up.”

Peter shrugged.

“That’s fine,” Abe said. “That means we have an excuse to leave the school!”

A few of the students cheered.

“And go *where*?” Flash asked with a sneer.

“We could go anywhere,” MJ said. “There are a ton of free museums we could visit. MOMA, the Guggenheim, the Folk Art Museum.”

“There’s also the botanical gardens,” Cindy added. “They’re free.”

“No offense,” Flash said, in his most offensive voice, “but I could go to a free museum any time. If we’re going to do something cool, let’s make it *cool*. Not just something I could walk into any day of the week.”

“Also,” Mr. Harrington said, “if you want Principal Morita to approve an off-campus field trip you might want to *try* and make it school related? Or something that will look good if it winds up in the paper.”

“Like our club’s field trip would ever end up in the news,” Cindy scoffed.

Mr. Harrington shrugged, as if trying to get across ‘You’re not wrong’ without saying it. “Still, it’ll be easier convincing the principal if it’s something that will *look* good.”

“Why would we need the principal’s permission anyway?” Charles questioned. “We’d be going during club hours, which is after school.”

“Well, *you* could all do that, I suppose,” Mr. Harrington said, “but you’d have to plan it amongst yourselves, and it wouldn’t be a club event. If you want to plan it during club hours, and have it affiliated with the school, then the school needs to sanction it.” He shrugged. “Politics are politics, even in academia.”

“My mom’s not going to let me just run around the city with a bunch of other teens *without* supervision,” Yasmin said. She’d joined the decathlon team this year and she was really good at memorizing, but not so good at answering with confidence.

“Nor mine,” Charles agreed.

Mr. Harrington shrugged. “Then a school sanctioned trip it is.” He looked at his watch. “But hey, let’s hold off on any more planning until next meeting. We were supposed to be out of this room twenty minutes ago and I’ve got to get home before my dog piddles on the floor.”

“TMI, Mr. Harrington,” Ned complained as Tyler and Sally groaned theatrically.

Mr. Harrington shrugged.

Peter returned to packing, as did the other students in the room, but this time with more ecstatic conversation. Cindy and Sally had their heads together, muttering excitedly about this ephemeral, yet-to-be-planned field trip, Flash was spitting out places he thought they should go which were *much* too expensive, and Abe was typing furiously into his phone, probably trying to find some places himself.

“Where do *you* think we should go?” Ned asked, as he very slowly loaded up his backpack.

Peter shrugged. Truth to tell, his mind was already on the project he had waiting for him at the tower.

“I think we should do something funner than the MOMA,” Ned said.

“The MOMA sounds plenty fun to me,” MJ said, passing Ned to get to her own bag, which was at the table behind where Peter and Ned had been sitting.

“Like, a *ghost tour*!” Ned continued, ignoring MJ. He looked at Peter with wide eyes. “Yes! I want to go on a ghost tour!”

Behind Ned's head, Peter watched MJ make a silly face, and Peter had to purse his lips to keep from laughing. When he thought it was safe, he asked, "Are there even any ghost tours nearby?"

Ned shrugged. "I don't know! But we could find out."

"Ned, I don't think that'll work," Abe said, coming to stop next to Peter and Ned. He'd been on his way out, but hearing Ned's exuberance, had paused.

"Why not?" Ned asked.

"Oh, Nerd-Wonder," MJ said amiably, slinging her backpack over her shoulder and coming to join Peter and Ned and Abe. "How would you convince Principal Morita that a ghost tour is either a) an academic venture, or b) something that would look good for the school?"

Ned deflated. "Ah," he said.

"Sorry, Ned," Abe said. "But hey, if you have any more ideas, just let me know. I'm determined that we are going to do *something* fun this year."

"Hear, hear!" Ned said.

"I wonder if there's a list of school-friendly field trip options somewhere online," MJ said. "Or recommended field trip options."

"Or unrecommended ones!" Ned said excitedly.

MJ sighed. "What does that *mean*, Nerd-Wonder?"

"Why are you calling me that?" Ned asked.

"I think it's a play on boy-wonder," Peter told him.

MJ pointed at Peter, "*You* are Boy-Wonder, Ned is Nerd-Wonder."

"Aww," Peter said, smiling at her, "thanks!"

"I want to be Boy-Wonder," Ned complained with a pout.

"I'll switch tomorrow," MJ offered, "and then *you* can be Boy-Wonder and Peter can be Nerd-Wonder."

"I'm still choosing to take that as a compliment," Peter told her.

MJ shrugged in a 'what can you do?' sort of way.

"I think you three are all very strange," Abe said. "Ned, what did you mean by *unrecommended* field trips?"

"Did you mean *bad* places to go?" MJ asked.

"No!" Ned said. "I mean places that aren't usually field trip places! Like, two years ago the New York Times had a drawing for, like, one school to be able to tour its buildings. I entered Midtown, but we didn't win. But wouldn't that be cool! If we could find a drawing or a raffle or something that would let us win a chance to go someplace that school trips don't *normally* go to."

"That *would* be cool," Abe said.

“Wow, Nerd-Wonder,” MJ said, “good thinking.”

“Of course,” Abe said, getting his phone out and starting to search such drawings as he spoke, “there’s no guarantee that we’ll win.”

“That just gives us the excuse to enter multiple ones!” Ned exclaimed.

“Don’t just search for raffles,” Peter said, thinking back to the previous evening’s conversation he’d had with Pepper and Tony. “We should also search for competitions.” He shrugged. “It wouldn’t hurt to enter those too.”

“Sounds good,” Abe said, down into his phone. He blinked up at Peter after half a minute of typing. “What made you think of that?”

Peter shrugged one shoulder. “I heard about a, um, competition to tour the Avengers compound.” Immediately both Ned and Abe perked up. “Hey, uh, don’t get your hopes up,” he told them. “I don’t even know what the competition’s about, or what the criteria are or anything. I doubt we’d win *that* anyway, there must be a thousand clubs competing to get in.” And frankly, Peter did *not* want his club touring the Avengers compound, because the Avengers compound was his *house*, and he didn’t want his whole stupid decathlon club touring his house! But, he wasn’t *really* worried because what was the actual likelihood, if his club *did* enter, that they would win? Nearly infinitesimal.

“But,” he continued, “you know, like, radio stations are always doing competition-style win-a-trips for classes and stuff, we should enter some of those.”

Abe’s thumbs flew as he typed Peter’s suggestions into his phone. “Those all sound like great ideas.” He gave Ned, Peter, and MJ a thumbs up. “Good job.”

“Heck yeah!” Ned crowed happily. He went for several successive high-fives, which Peter returned warmly, Abe returned apathetically, and MJ returned after a very ominous pause.

“MJ,” Mr. Harrington called from the door, “Peter, Ned, Abe! Let’s *go*.”

Peter looked around to find that during their conversation the room had emptied.

“Sorry, Mr. H,” Abe said as he high-tailed it out of there.

“Yeah,” Ned said, “sorry, we were just brainstorming.”

“Well that’s nice,” Mr. Harrington said, obviously just placating them. “But I’ve got to get home to Ralphie, so let’s go.”

“What kind of dog is Ralphie?” MJ asked as they exited the room and Mr. Harrington locked up behind them.

“Boston Terrier,” Mr. Harrington said, sounding delighted to be talking about his dog. He kept talking as the four of them walked out of the building. “He’s turning four in June, and I think I’m going to get him a bandana. He looks ever so dashing in a bandana.”

“Classic red?” Ned asked.

“He goes more for blues and yellows,” Mr. Harrington said. “Of course, those are the only colors he can see so,” he shrugged, “it only makes sense.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it! More Field tripy things coming in the following chapters, which I'm going to try and put out in a shorter time than two weeks :D

In other news, I'm not regretting titling my fic 'Neon Liar' because I think I like it, but every time I try and say 'Neon Liar' out loud I just end up saying 'Neon Lighter' and like, I don't usually have a speech impediment with those letter, but literally *every time* it's just 'Neon Lighter,' 'Neon Lighter,' 'Neon Lighter'
What's happening to me???

E tu, Parker?

Chapter Notes

I'm starting to think Peter's decision making process just includes one question, and it's "Is this decision going to backfire? Excellent. I'm in!"

...

Hint! Going forward, hover over foreign languages for a translation!
(I can't believe I figured out how to do that, I hope to Thor it works)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Time passed.

The next Decathlon meeting Abe announced a list of possible locations (free) and a separate list of drawings and competitions the group could enter. The general consensus seemed to be that they'd enter all the competitions and raffles they could get their grubby little hands on, and if all of those fell through (which was a high probability, Mr. Harrington insisted on informing them all at every given opportunity) then they'd go to one of the free places (Peter was voting for the botanical gardens, if only because he wanted to film Ned recreating the "Where are my berries?" vines and then send them to everyone he knew).

The meeting after that they started devoting a half an hour at the beginning of each session (time usually reserved for chatting and horse playing anyway) to filling out the raffles, and entering the competitions; a surprising number of which were essay contests.

(Perhaps Peter shouldn't be surprised at that, but he'd hoped they'd be something fun, something *unique*. He wrote enough essays for school, thank you very much.)

Peter got used to walking into Academic decathlon meetings, Ned at his side, MJ leading the way, to find Abe at the front of the room, setting up the class's commandeered document camera and attached projector with the prompt of the day on it. Often it was some variation of: 'Write about a time when working together has helped you overcome an obstacle,' or 'Where do you see yourself in ten years, and what is your motivation to get there?' (Though sometimes there'd be a new contender. 'Why do diplomacy and peace building matter?' 'What does the word "heroic" mean to you?' 'Describe and analyze an act of courage you've experienced in your life?' 'In your experience, how have you been impacted by the labels others have put on you?' etc etc).

They'd brainstorm for a while, as a group (since they would win, as a group) and then the actual essay writing would be assigned to one person (on a rotating basis), who would write it up using the notes from the meeting, and give it to Abe the next day. Abe was in charge of all the actual submissions, since it was his idea, and honestly, there were so many essays— so many things they brainstormed so many times a week— Abe didn't even bother them with what contest they were brainstorming *for* that day.

It was all sort of a blur, everyone talking over each other, shouting out ideas. And then at exactly the thirty minute mark, on the dot, Mr. Harrington would cut them off to start the actual meeting,

and things evened out. But honestly, writing the essays wasn't so bad. With everyone fleshing out *what* to write together, it always seemed to come together pretty easily afterwards. Peter didn't even mind when it was his turn.

Ned got "What does the word "heroic" mean to you?" and complained about it excessively, MJ got "Where do you see yourself in ten years, and what is your motivation to get there?" and actually seemed to enjoy that one. When it was Peter's turn he got: "In your experience, how have you been impacted by the labels others have put on you?"

The brainstormed ideas all seemed to be around the "nerd" label, something that all the members of the 'Academic Decathlon' could relate to. Cindy brought up the term "gamer girl" which Peter tried to work into the essay as well as he could, seeing as how that wasn't a personal experience to himself. But, he was afraid that he *was* guilty of maybe taking the prompt a little close to home. He didn't *out* himself, but there were a lot of expectations that came with being a "superhero," and maybe he leaned into that feeling (vaguely— to protect his identity) a little too much.

Still, he was happy with the outcome. And then the next meeting it was Flash's turn, and Peter got the satisfaction of knowing that Flash was going to have to write about why diplomacy and peace building matter, a subject that wasn't nearly as fun as Peter's. And also, Peter was pretty sure Flash didn't have a diplomatic bone in his body.

Eventually they ran out of contests and raffles to enter, and as the Decathlon meetings returned to their normal length, and as practice got serious once more, well, the memory of their promised field trip fell by the wayside.

Until, one day, Abe came in looking a little more put-out than usual.

"Sorry guys," he said, standing at the front of the room next to a disconcerted-looking MJ, who had tried to call the group to order before being soundly interrupted by Abe. "We got our first rejection."

"Rejection?" Sue asked.

"Aww," Flash said unkindly, "Abraham got rejected!"

"Flash!" MJ snapped, and Flash subsided.

"Not *me*, moron," Abe said, "all of us. From the— the essay thing! We got a rejection letter."

There were a few half-hearted groans.

"Which one did we lose?" Peter asked.

Part of him was upset that they'd already failed, but a bigger part of him hoped that Abe would say it was the Avengers Compound Tour one, and then the low-level anxiety he'd had simmering for the past several months could finally disappear.

Alas for Peter, Abe said, "The iHeartRadio one. We could have gone to a Nickelback Cover concert!"

The reactions to that were mixed at best.

"I'm not really upset to miss that one," Cindy admitted to Yasmin.

"Me neither," Yasmin agreed.

“Well *yeah*,” Abe said, “No one really wanted to *go* to a Nickelback cover concert, but still! We got *rejected*.”

“Harsh, bro,” Charles muttered.

“Yes, well,” MJ said, “I’m sure we’re all pretty broken up that we won’t get to make ‘Look at this — Graph!’ jokes, but if we could all just get to work maybe we can actually make it to nationals and *earn* this field trip.”

“If we even *get* a field trip,” Ned muttered under his breath. MJ sent him a glare, and he raised his hands, palms forward, in submission.

Peter couldn’t help letting out a tiny snicker beneath his breath.

Ned glared at him and whispered, “E tu, Parker?” But Peter just shook his head and laughed again.

More time passed.

Rejection letters came in steadily, first a trickle, then a flood, and then a trickle once again. It was looking more and more likely that they’d have to choose a free field trip (Botanical gardens! Botanical gardens! Botanical gardens!) when one day Abe came in with a suspiciously neutral expression on his face.

“Alright,” MJ called, having dropped her stuff at Peter’s usual table and stalked to the front of the class, taking her rightful place as ruler of the Academic Decathlon team. “Today we’ll be going over—”

“Wait,” Abe called “I have exciting news.”

“Do you?” MJ asked in a dry, disbelieving tone.

“Yes!” Abe said, some excitement leaking into his tone.

MJ looked to Mr. Harrington. Her expression showed that her hope was that Mr. Harrington would tell Abe to sit down and let MJ do her job.

Mr. Harrington wasn’t to be trusted.

“Alright, Abe,” the teacher said, “but make it snappy.”

Abe scooted to the front of the class with enthusiasm. “Ok kids, I’ve got some good news!”

“I’m older than you,” Charles said, very loudly.

“Me too,” Sue said, and Sally nodded in agreement.

Abe raised his hands for silence, and didn’t get it.

“Guys!” he whined.

“Hey,” MJ barked and immediately the noise dissipated. She turned to Abe. “You have three minutes.”

Abe nodded solemnly, turned to face the team, and said with sudden abandon, “We won!”

“Yes!” Ned shouted. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“We’re going on a field-trip,” Tyler sing-songed.

Cindy pumped her fist in the air.

Sally and Yasmin high-fived.

“I bet it was *my* essay,” Flash bragged. “I just know it was my amazing prowess with writing that got us this win.”

“No way in heck,” Ned said.

“Yuh *huh*,” Flash insisted.

Ned turned to Abe. “What essay was it?”

Abe blinked, and then pulled his phone from his pocket. “Uh,” he said as he typed and then scrolled and then clicked, “it looks like... the um... labels one.”

That made Peter sit up straight. That was the one *he’d* done.

“Told you it was mine!” Flash crowed.

“Shut up, Flash,” Cindy snapped. “You did *not* write that one. You wrote the one about diplomacy.”

“Diplomacy, labels,” Flash said, “what’s the difference.”

“Oh my god,” MJ snapped. “Everything. Flash, sit back and stop trying to hog the spotlight. Now, who wrote the labels essay?”

There was a beat where nobody raised their hands and then Peter, realizing that he was going to have to admit he’d written that essay, put his hand in the air.

“But,” he said, “really, it was really a joint effort. Without all that brainstorming I wouldn’t have written *nearly* as good an essay, I mean, at all, but everyone—”

“Parker,” MJ said, “calm down.”

“Yeah, dude,” Tyler said, “it’s not the oscars. You don’t have to thank the academy.”

Peter shifted in his seat, a tad embarrassed, but couldn’t help putting on a presenter-voice and saying, dramatically, “And I’d like to thank the Academy for this opportunity! And my mother, and god— I mean, uh, Thor.”

Ned shoved at Peter’s arm with a laugh.

“So where are we going?” Yasmin asked excitedly.

“Yeah, don’t leave us hanging,” Charles agreed.

Abe’s lips curled involuntarily into the biggest smile Peter thought he’d ever seen on the other boy’s face and he did a tiny little wiggle before taking a deep breath and trying to calm himself. In a voice that was evidently supposed to be even, but was definitely not, Abe said, “We’ve been welcomed to an all-expense-paid trip to the Avengers compound!!” He squealed. “We’re going on

a tour of the *Avengers Compound*!”

The room exploded. Voices shouting, arms waving about, Peter’s peers jumping up and down in excitement, and all Peter could feel was a slow cold dread seeping down his spine.

The... Avengers compound?

They’d actually *won*? A tour. Of the Avengers compound?

His first actual thought was that somehow Tony or one of the gang had found out which essay was his— his *club*’s— and had chosen him because of favoritism reasons.

Could it still count as nepotism if he wasn’t actually biologically related to any of them?

But he quickly pushed that thought away. They wouldn’t do that. Tony wouldn’t spring that sort of thing on him, and Steve *definitely* wouldn’t approve of such underhanded tactics.

But that brought on an even bigger concern! Now his whole Academic Decathlon team was slated to take a tour of Peter’s ever-loving *home*. And none of his... (were they family? Or were they roommates? So often it felt like it landed somewhere in the ephemeral space between those two categories)... the Avengers knew!

And they never *would* know. That was the third thought Peter had. He would go out of his way so that no one at home ever found out. If they knew he was coming they’d at the most try to prank or embarrass or just tease him in front of his peers (a very parent/Aunt May thing to do, and something that wouldn’t worry him except for two reasons. 1. He didn’t really want anyone at school knowing he lived with the *Avengers*. He liked his quiet, banal, school life just the way it was. And 2. Flash. He didn’t want to add any fuel to *that* fire.), and at the least greet him. There wasn’t a good option. But if they didn’t *know* he was coming, maybe he could avoid all of that.

And it could probably be done. Tony and Pepper had already told Peter that there’d be a warning before a tour, so Peter could pick up after himself (remove anything that could identify him to his peers) to keep his teammates from finding out he lived at the Avengers Compound!

He didn’t know if the Avengers themselves would be around, which might cause a problem... oh well, he’d have to ask Tony (surreptitiously) and then plan accordingly. But he could make it work.

Yeah.

Yeah.

He let out a breath, and realized that while he was having his little mini-freak out and subsequent solo brainstorm on how to deal with this new situation, the rest of the room had continued their louder, more excited freak-out.

“Peter!” Ned shouted, “Oh my god! Peter! We’re going to *tour* the Avengers Compound! Oh my god, Peter! I think I’m going to faint.”

Peter picked up Ned’s abandoned Decathlon notes and curved them into a fan which he used to fan Ned’s face. “Calm down,” he told his friend, “you’re not going to faint.”

“I am,” Ned insisted. “I’m going to die!”

“Before the tour?” Peter asked.

Ned gasped. “No! I don’t want to die before seeing the compound! Especially now that I actually have a chance!”

Peter blinked at his friend. “If you wanted to visit so bad you could have asked me...”

“No,” Ned said, suddenly serious. “I *never* want you to think I’m only your friend because you have mad Avengers connections. I would *never*—”

Peter cut Ned off with a laugh. “I know that, dude,” he said. “I’d never think that of you. But still, if I knew you’d be this excited...”

“I am!” Ned yelped. He was practically vibrating in his seat, and with Ned so excited Peter couldn’t help but smile himself.

“When is it?” Cindy cut through the cacophony to ask.

“Ok, ok,” Abe said, “I’ve got all the details here. Uh, Mr. Harrington can I...?” he gestured to the document camera and Mr. Harrington nodded. “Cool.” He set his phone beneath the camera, and on the smartboard at the front of the class, blown up impossibly big, was Abe’s phone, and all the details about the trip that were shown on it.

“Are you going to send this out?” Tyler asked.

Abe sighed. “I’ll send a screencap to all of you. But look, take note of the date and time, and all of these restrictions.”

“Looks like someone from a newspaper might be there with us!” Sue said.

“Some PR thing, no doubt,” Cindy said drily.

“Who cares if it’s PR or not,” Charles said. “I’d love to see my face in the newspaper.”

“Who reads newspapers anymore?” Flash scoffed.

Peter squinted at the front screen. “It’s the Friday after semi-finals,” Peter said.

“Yes,” Mr Harrington enthused, “Perfect timing! If we win, it’ll be our reward for almost getting to the finals.”

“And if we lose,” MJ added, “it’ll be a nice consolation prize. Can we *please* get to the actual meeting?”

“Michelle,” Yasmin whined, “let us off today. Please? We have to plan!”

MJ shook her head. “No. I refuse to visit the Avengers Compound as a consolation prize. We are, at the very least, going to finals. And that means *practicing*.”

“Alright, alright,” Mr. Harrington said. “Michelle is right. Let’s get to practicing. But, before we do that, I see *one* thing about this trip that you will all have to deal with as soon as possible. It looks like there are Non-disclosure agreements and waivers each of you will have to sign. If Abraham emails you all the...” he trailed off at the sea of shaking heads and sighed. “Abraham, send me that email with the documents, I’ll print off enough for each of you for our next meeting. *And* a permission slip. Since it looks like this will have to be a school-sanctioned trip what with it being on a school day after all, and don’t worry, I’m sure Principal Morita will be over the moon, but since this *will* be school sanctioned, and during school hours, you will all have to have a

permission slip signed by a parent or guardian.”

There was a chorus of groans.

“Why are you whining?” Mr. Harrington asked, his voice one of genuine confusion. “Get Mom or Dad or whoever to sign on the dotted line, bring it back to me. It’s not difficult.”

This wasn’t quite true in Peter’s case, as Aunt May, his guardian, was nowhere close enough to be able to sign his permission slip, and they hadn’t exactly let the school know that Tony Stark was acting guardian while Aunt May was abroad. May had initially wanted to (following the correct paths and all that) but Peter had begged her not to. He didn’t want anyone at school finding out that, again, he was living with the Avengers, and as much as the teachers liked to pretend they were above such juvenile actions, if one teacher found out, *all* the teachers would know, and then they’d treat him differently, and then the *students* would know something was wrong (like sharks, smelling blood in the water), and Peter just really didn’t want to deal with that.

But permission slips... they didn’t even *have* them yet. Permission slip and guardian signature problems were a future-Peter’s worry, and he pushed that thought away.

“So, practice,” MJ prompted, and finally the team settled, though the rest of the time seemed to pass in starts and stops, and no one was really able to pay one hundred percent attention.

After all, an exciting field trip was in their future.

Peter let the knowledge of the imminent field trip ruminate in his mind for almost a full week, letting ideas and possible plans slip through his mind, before he actually tried to find out anything *more* about the trip.

He wasn’t going to tell the Avengers, or Tony, or Pepper, or even Aunt May that he was one of the ones coming for the tour. Or at least, he might tell Aunt May, but much, *much* later. The less the Avengers knew about the field trip, the less that could go wrong.

But still, if he was going to pull off this heist (it wasn’t a heist, but goddamnit, he was going to make this feel as Oceans’ Eleven as he could! Oceans’ One? Unless he counted Ned and MJ too. Ocean’s Three? *Parker’s* Three? No, that didn’t sound good. Midtown’s Three? ... Good enough), then he needed as much inside information as he could get his hands on.

Peter was helping Tony in the lab in the compound’s basement after dinner (Bruce had offered to make his grandma’s famous Buffalo Chicken Mac and Cheese Bake, and when that had burned to a crisp, Tony had had one of the Compound’s many non-Avengers personnel go out and bring back classic Americana diner fare for them to consume) when he decided to broach the subject. Steve and Wanda were both down there as well, Steve testing the tensile strength of some new Iron Man armor Peter had finished mocking up, with his shield and a lot of raw power, and Wanda reading in a corner. She was technically reading in a corner of the ceiling, as she’d started to float upwards around ten minutes in, but they were still trying to get her used to using her powers for mundane things, so she’d feel comfortable with them in *any* situation, and so seeing her down here, in the wildly durable lab was a common sight.

“So,” Peter said, as he poked at the communication device Thor had accidentally fried the previous week, “how’s the, uh, search for field tri— I mean, like, the tour thingy, uh, yeah, how’s that going?”

It took a moment for Tony to drag himself away from his project (working on a smoother interface for his Stark-Glasses™) and look at Peter, and it took a longer moment for him to rewind Peter's question in his head. He squinted at Peter. "Do you mean the planning of the trip?"

"No," Peter said, "Or, um, yes, that too. But first, I meant finding groups to go."

Tony's expression cleared. "Oh! Yes! We've narrowed down the best essays," he whistled, "there were some really good ones, Pete. Did I tell you what the prompt was?"

"No," Peter said, because that was the truth, though at this point he did already know what it was. "So you found a group?" Peter prompted.

"Several," Tony said. "Our first tour will be happening later this month. I think right now we have three set up. But like we told you earlier, Peter," Tony said, "we'll give everyone warning before we let some strangers tramp through the house. And we'll have someone trustworthy from the first floor lead them, so you've got nothing to worry about."

When Tony said the first floor he didn't really mean the first floor of the compound, though technically the staff who worked at the compound did sometimes work on the first floor. The first floor was just where guest and staff entry was, whereas the residents of the building entered, mostly, through the resident parking garage beneath the first floor. The staff that ran the building could be anyone from security personnel to Carl who ran the late-night kitchen to custodial staff to Donna and Jay who worked as the compound liaisons to the Avengers human resources staff. It was probably one of the HR staff that Tony had in mind. He doubted he'd ask Carl to lead a tour group.

This could be its own problem as both Donna and Jay knew Peter. (A strange youth starts living with the Avengers, the Avengers HR team *needs* to know about it in case it gets out somehow and Peter becomes a liability [either physically targeted by a faction who is Anti-Avenger, or attacked by the media via uncouth speculation]). Of course, most of the staff— who was Peter kidding, *all* of the staff who worked in the building knew Peter. And they would definitely greet him, like they *always* greeted him when he roamed the compound and out-buildings.

But! They *didn't* know him nearly as well as Tony and Pepper, and well, all of the Avengers knew him. He *might* be able to get out of being recognized if he made sure not to look them in the face, and didn't wear anything identifiable.

Maybe.

(Like so many other things,) He'd work on that later.

"Cool," Peter said, filing away that information and focusing back on Tony. "So, uh, what's the tour gonna be like?"

Tony grinned at him. "Why? You wanna attend?" He shrugged, affecting a casual expression. "I'm sure whatever group goes wouldn't mind a hanger-on, if you're *really* interested in touring the place you *live*, that you probably know better than whoever's even *giving* the tour."

Peter purposefully didn't think about how close that was to the truth. "Please no," Peter said, "I'm just curious. Like..." he had to think for a moment, "like, are they going to see the lab? The normal living room or just the dying room? The, like, the jet?"

Tony hummed and looked off into the middle distance. "I don't know if we've got that set in stone yet, and I'm not really the only one making these decisions— Pepper's got a hand in everything, as

you know— but if I had to guess? I'd say, probably just the formal living room, sorry," he said, his tone teasing, "the *dying* room, perhaps the training areas— why not *all* the gyms, am I right? — some lab space but maybe not this specific one." He turned to Steve, who was across the room, hammering the edge of his shield into an Iron Man chest plate. "Hey Steve! Does that sound about right to you?"

Steve stopped his repetitious violence and straightened up. His breathing was a little strained, but he didn't look flushed despite the vigor he'd just been attacking the armor with. "What was that Tony?"

"Not even listening," Tony muttered, and he must have known Steve could hear him, but he muttered it anyway. In a louder tone of voice he said, "The little tour groups. Peter was asking what the tour would be like. Formal living room, gym, lab— does all of that sound right to you?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. Sam was thinking it might be fun to set up a little pop-up museum in one of the conference rooms we never use with some of our old gear."

"Oh, that's great, Cap," Tony said, and whipped out his phone to shoot off a text. Probably to Pepper.

"That's what I told Sam," Steve agreed. He wiped nonexistent sweat from his forehead and abandoned the chest piece to come closer to Tony and Peter.

"Anything else you can think of," Tony said, "we'd appreciate it. I still feel like we're flying by the seat of our pants on this little venture."

"Donna assures us it'll be good PR," Steve said, in a tone that implied that he didn't much care for PR.

"Pep too," Tony said with a sigh.

"What are you boys conspiring over there?" Wanda's voice rang out suddenly, and Peter turned to watch her float effortlessly back down to the floor, where she landed softly on her feet. She marked her page in her book with her finger and then joined the three of them over by Tony and Peter's work benches.

"We're not conspiring," Peter said, "we're just talking about the tours that you're going to be having soon."

"*We're* going to be having soon," Tony corrected. "You live here too, sport."

"Not much longer if you call me 'sport' again," Peter warned in faux-anger.

"Champ?" Tony offered, fighting a smile.

"How dare you."

"Woah there, Tiger," Tony said, trying to stifle obvious laughter.

"That's it," Peter said, "I'm outta here. I'm going to hunt down Aunt May and quit school and travel the world! She'd never call me Sport. Or Champ."

"Or Tiger," Wanda added.

"Exactly!" Peter exclaimed.

“Fine, fine, no more nicknames,” Tony said.

“That’s right,” Peter said, trying for haughty, but it came out more like an imitation of Flash (ew).

“Now that we’ve got that Abbott and Costello bit behind us,” Steve said, and then turned to Wanda, “can you think of anything fun for the tour groups we’ll have coming through here?”

Wanda tapped a finger against her chin. “Not as such, no. I believe Clint was thinking about letting them see his bow collection, but I’m also one hundred percent sure that he’s going to get cold feet about that before any guests actually appear. Those bows are like his babies.”

“I know,” Tony and Steve said, drily, at the same time.

Tony’s head spun to Steve, and with a gleeful expression on his face he said, “Pinch, poke, you owe me a coke.”

Peter frowned. “Isn’t it just jinx? Jinx, you owe me a coke,” he shrugged, “or any other soda.”

Tony turned to Peter with wide eyes and an exaggeratedly upset expression. “This is what’s wrong with your generation.”

“No,” Steve said, “Tony, that’s what’s wrong with *your* generation. Back in my day—”

“*Back in my day*,” Tony imitated in a nasally falsetto.

“Back in *my* day,” Steve reiterated louder, “if you jinxed someone it meant you were putting a curse on them, and all of their crops would die and their children would be born without eyes.”

Peter blinked rapidly and looked to find that Tony was also reeling a little. They turned semi-horrified gazes on Steve, who was staring at them with solemnity. And then Steve’s expression cracked and he let out a laugh. “I’m just joshing you. If you jinxed someone they couldn’t talk until someone said their name.”

“Oh,” Peter said, somewhat relieved and fully confused, “that sounds familiar.”

“You fucking troll,” Tony said with a laugh.

Wanda cleared her throat. “In Sokovia we say ‘Ви Американци сте сви идиоти,’ which means ‘Slap, stab, your uncle owes my father ten million dinar. Pay now or I will call the authorities and your extended family will all be tied up in a legal battle for the next ten years.’”

“I think that’s beautiful,” Peter said.

Wanda sighed, but a smile curled along the corners of her lips. “You would.”

Peter grinned at her.

“Are we done here?” Tony asked. He checked his watch. “I think we’re done here. It’s almost time for bed.”

“For you maybe,” Peter said, and checked his phone for the time. “And also for me. Geez, is it that late already?”

“Yes,” Tony said decisively. “Come, Ward. We’re closing down shop for the night.”

“Guess that means I’m done too,” Steve said. “The armor’s very durable. There were a few tears

along the seams after the first hour of battering it with the shield, but other than that, it held up *very* well.”

“Good,” Tony said, as he ushered all of them out the door.

“Wait,” Peter said, as the four of them left the lab and made their way the short distance to the residential area of the compound. “I have another question about the, uh, the field trip thing.”

“You’re awfully interested,” Wanda said.

“Uh,” Peter said, very intelligently. “Well, um, there are going to be, uh, strangers in my house.”

“What’s your question, Peter?” Tony asked.

What was the best way to ask if the tour groups would be *meeting* any of the Avengers? Peter could hide himself, disguise himself, from Donna and Jay. He wasn’t stupid enough to think he could hide from *any* of the Avengers.”

“Uh,” Peter said slowly, “is there going to be,” he said slowly, trying to think as he spoke, “a, um, like, a q-and-a type thing?” There, that was vague enough that they wouldn’t question him, right? And then to clarify. “With the Avengers.”

Tony and Steve looked at each other. “No,” Tony said, “I don’t think anything like that is planned.”

“Not as far as I know,” Steve agreed.

Peter sighed out in relief. Good. No Avenger interactions. He let himself relax a little.

“Anything else?” Tony asked.

“No,” Peter said brightly, “I think that’s all.”

“Then straight to bed,” Tony said.

“March straight to your room, young man,” Wanda said in a faux stern voice, “and don’t make me tell you twice!”

Peter stuck his tongue out at her which made her laugh, and then he gave her a dramatic salute and marched off, chanting in the way of every TV drill sergeant he’d ever seen: “I don’t know what I’ve been told! This high school stuff is getting old! Sound off! One Two! Sound Off! Three Four! Sound off! One two three four. One Two! Three Four!” And he didn’t stop until he got to his bedroom, and the sound of Tony’s, Wanda’s, and Steve’s mingled laughter was far and distant, though no less jovial.

Chapter End Notes

Writing is weird hard rn

Words are fake af lol

Bad Bet

Chapter Notes

I'm just going to upload this real quick before anyone else in my house wakes up because I know if I wait I won't have time to get back on here until who knows when :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When it came time to take home and fill out the various pieces of paperwork that were all apparently important in order to tour one of the most protected buildings in the continental United States, Peter had an important decision to make. He hadn't particularly expected to be going on any serious field trips this year (after DC, the school, as a whole, had pushed external trips to the back seat), and he hadn't discussed with May how to deal with any possible parent/guardian signature problems.

In his defense, May should have thought of it, maybe, but she hadn't either.

So now his options were to admit to the school that May was abroad, and, he didn't know, have her fax them the paperwork? Or scan and email it? But then they'd know May wasn't watching him, and they'd want to know who *was* watching him, and the answer was Tony mother-flippin Stark. If it was going to come out that Tony was his acting guardian anyway, than he might as well have Tony sign the papers (NDAs and permission slips and several other odds and ends that he read over at lunch and only understood every third word of), since telling May about the trip, and then sending them to her, and then having her find a place to print them out, sign them, and then fax them to the school would take much longer than the amount of time Mr. Harrington had requested them return the paperwork to him anyway.

In both of these scenarios, the end result was that the school would find out he's been living with and is being taken care of by, world-famous superhero and billionaire, Tony Stark.

Peter really wanted to avoid that, if at all possible.

So, the obvious solution was to forge Aunt May's signature. As much as Peter tried to be a good student, and a good nephew, this was not the first time he's had to forge her signature. Ironically, he often had to do so for field trip permission slips. Not because she'd forbade the trip and he'd wanted to go anyway, but because they were both often absent-minded and forgot that the permission slip needed to be signed until, well, until Peter was sitting in class and the teacher asked everyone to pass the slips forward. So yes, Peter had gotten quite adept at forging May's signature. The fact that he was now doing it ahead of time and not secretly behind his propped-up arm in the middle of class was actually sort of refreshing.

He signed *May Parker* on the line of the permission slip with a flourish, and dated it to the day before, and then did the same with the various forms that had come from the Avengers compound.

It occurred to him that whoever was going through the forms on the first floor of the compound might recognize his name as belonging to a resident of the building (especially if it was Donna or Jay), but he was just going to have to cross his fingers that they wouldn't put two and two together until it was too late. If the Avengers found out that he'd attended a field trip to the compound *after*

said field trip, well, that was fine. They could tease him all they liked without involving his classmates. He just didn't want them finding out *beforehand*.

So, as Peter signed *May Parker* over and over, he kept his fingers crossed and hoped for the best.

And, for once in his life, something actually went right. In the final weeks leading up the trip Tony never confronted him about Peter apparently attending a field trip to the compound, and neither did Pepper, or Donna, or Jay, or any other of the compound's employees.

So... that was good.

(He told himself it was good. He told himself that just because something was coming out his way *didn't* mean something else far worse was going to happen. He told himself that karma wasn't real, or that at least he didn't believe in it. He told himself to relax, that it would all go fine.)

(He was wrong.)

And Mr. Harrington accepted the papers with the forged signatures with nary a sideways glance.

"What do you think we're going to see?" Ned whispered to Peter in the middle of a Decathlon meeting the week before the field trip.

Peter shrugged and tried to focus on Betty and Tyler, who were debating at the front of the room.

"Peter," Ned hissed. "Peter! What do you mean you don't know! Peter, you *live there*."

"Ned," MJ said from her place near the front, "No talking during debate."

After the meeting, while the room was packing up, and Mr. Harrington had stepped away from the room to do some teachery thing he hadn't bothered to explain to them, Ned asked Peter the same question again. "What do you think we're going to see on the tour?"

"I don't know, Ned," Peter said with a sigh. "I'm not exactly on the Avengers Compound's planning committee."

"I think," Yasmin said, stepping into their admittedly not very quiet conversation, "that we'll probably end up just being shown rooms that are decorated in ways to *emulate* the Avengers. There's no way they'll just let some teens stomp through the Avengers' *real* rooms."

"This tour thing wasn't limited to just teens," Abe pointed out.

"I don't think they'd let some strange adults stomp through the Avengers' real rooms either," Yasmin said. "My point stands."

"When you say the Avengers' rooms," Sally said, "do you mean their *bed* rooms?"

Charles scoffed. "They're not going to let strangers into the Avengers *bedrooms*."

Ned looked at Peter with a quirked eyebrow, and with a sigh Peter added, loudly, to really hammer this point home to Ned, "I agree, they *definitely* wouldn't let strangers roam the private areas of famous superheroes. Especially their bedrooms."

Ned made a 'Fine, have it your way' expression at Peter, which almost made Peter's badly hidden irritation crack into a smile.

"Well," Yasmin said, "I *did* say they'd probably just have rooms *emulating* the Avengers style."

Sally scoffed. “They’re not going to *pretend* to give us a tour of bedrooms either. That’s ridiculous.”

“Fine,” Yasmin snapped, “what do *you* think they’ll have on the tour?”

Sally thought for a moment, and Ned took this pause to waggle his eyes at Peter.

Peter mouthed, *I don’t know*, at Ned with as much emphasis as he could muster.

“Well,” Sally said, “What’s most impressive about the Avengers?”

“Their powers,” Flash said loudly.

“Their history of saving the world?” Tyler offered.

Peter thought of something, bit his lip, and then opened his mouth to say it anyway. “The fact that twelve adult humans can all reside in one dorm-style living situation without killing each other?”

Flash scoffed. “Shut up, Parker. They’re heroes! They wouldn’t fight!”

Peter thought back to board game night, where each and every single one of them (and Pepper, and Peter) were all at each other’s throats over a frankenstein’d Settlers of Catan board, until in a surprising twist, Rhodey won, betraying both Tony and Natasha in the process. The entire compound was tense for days.

Peter hadn’t been too happy with Rhodey either, but he was more irritated with Steve, who’d used his apple pie charm early in the game to trick Peter into making a misstep, the fiend.

“So,” Yasmin prompted, pulling Peter out of his own head in the process.

“Well,” Sally said, “I just think that if this is going to be a tour of the *Avengers Compound*, they’ll probably show off whatever makes the Avengers most popular. Maybe they have, like, a museum or something of old weapons and costumes—”

“Armor,” Ned corrected.

“Sure,” Sally said, “old armor, etcetera. Maybe some displays of villains they’ve defeated.”

“Wow,” Sue said, “do you think they’ll have some Chitauri tech? I’d love to see any of that stuff up close.”

“Didn’t we see enough Chitauri tech when it was trying to kill us in 2012?” MJ asked drily.

Sue looked at her. “I’m not saying I want to *hug* the stuff or whatever. I want to study it. Alien tech? Are you crazy? Who’d turn that down!”

Tony wouldn’t even let Peter near the remains of the Chitauri tech Tony had scavenged years before Peter had met the man. Said it was too dangerous. There was no way some tour group would ever be getting near it.

“Ok,” MJ admitted, “that’s valid.”

“Thank you, oh esteemed Decathlon Team Captain,” Sue said sarcastically, but bumped shoulders with MJ in a friendly way and MJ returned the gesture.

Ned shot Peter a glance. “Is there a museum of old armor at the compound?” He whispered to

Peter.

Peter shook his head and then remembered Steve saying something about a pop-up museum just for the tour groups and shrugged.

Ned lit up. “Dang,” he said, a little too loud.

“Think of something else?” Charles ased.

Ned’s head whipped to look Charles in the eye. “What?”

“You said ‘dang,’” Charles said. “Did you think of something?”

“Uh,” Ned said, “I was just, um, thinking, like, the Avengers, uh, must burn a lot of calories, fighting bad guys. They must have a really cool kitchen? I hope we get to see it?”

“Only you, Leeds,” Flash said with a scoff, and Ned flushed in embarrassment.

Peter heated up a little at that. “I think that’s a fine idea, Ned,” he said, though he knew Ned had just thought it up on the fly to hide his and Ned’s silent conversation. “I hear some celebrities have a seperate fridge for food and for drinks. Who knows. Maybe with all those people living together they have *several* refrigerators.”

That was cheating a little bit. Peter knew they had three working refrigerators and two refrigerator-sized freezers that were all restocked weekly to deal with the increased appetite of all superheroic metabolisms.

“I’ve heard about that kind of thing on TMZ,” Charles said.

“Ugh,” Cindy groaned, “how can you watch that garbage?”

“The same way you unironically watch The Jersey Shore,” Charles told her.

“How dare you slander the Jersey Shore. That’s a great show!”

“Not as good as desperate housewives,” Ned interjected.

Peter rolled his eyes.

“Now I’m excited,” Sue said, “I’m kind of an HGTV junkie. Do you think we’ll actually get to see the Avengers kitchen? I’m dying to know what kind of layout they have.”

“I’m not,” Tyler said, “I’ll just get jealous.”

“Why all the speculation?” Flash asked in a tone of voice that made the hair on the back of Peter’s neck stand on end. “I mean, we have a perfect insider *right* into the lives of all of the Avengers, don’t we? Or *do* we?”

“Are you talking about yourself?” MJ asked him, with just a hint of sly mischief in her voice. “Do you stalk them? Take pictures through their windows?”

“No!” Flash snapped with a furious scowl on his face. “I’m talking about Parker!”

MJ raised her eyebrows in a parody of surprise. “Peter’s a stalker?”

“I don’t spy through windows,” Peter said, which wasn’t strictly true. He swung around New York

City at night; spying through windows was just a way to pass the time.

“I meant his internship!” Flash said. “His fake internship! With Stark Industries!”

“It’s not fake,” Peter said, sternly.

“Peter has a fake internship?” Yasmin asked. She hadn’t been part of the Decathlon team last year when all of the Vulture stuff had gone down, and must have missed that little blip on the Midtown High radar.

“It’s not fake,” Peter repeated, and hated when he heard a whine enter his voice.

Flash scoffed. “Of course it’s fake! And we’re all going to find out how fake it is when we go to the Avengers Compound! I’ll finally be able to prove that you’re a liar.”

Peter groaned. “Flash! I’m not a liar.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Flash said, all smarmy and holier-than-thou, “at the field trip.”

“The field trip isn’t even *going* to Stark Industries,” Peter said.

“Yeah,” Ned said, “Peter’s internship is at SI. Why would going to a different building, like, hours away, prove *anything*?”

“Actually,” Cindy said, “I’m curious too, Flash. Why would you think that going to the *Avengers* Compound would help you find out *anything* about a *Stark Industries* employee.”

“Intern,” Peter corrected. “I don’t get paid.”

Cindy waved her hand in a ‘*whatever*’ fashion.

“Don’t be stupid,” Flash said. “Who do you think funds the Avengers? Tony Stark, obviously. And he must employ any staff at the compound as well. Their computer systems are probably connected as well. I bet you *anything* that if I have them look up SI interns in their system, that they’ll have access to *that*, and that Parker’s name won’t be on the list.”

Peter’s name *was* on the register for Stark Industries interns. If Flash somehow got someone at the compound (god knows how) to look up SI Interns, Peter’s name would be right there.

However, Peter did *not* want anyone looking him up, he didn’t want anyone to even *think* about him. He desperately, *desperately* needed Flash to never mention his name at all during the Field trip or all of his plans of not being spotted would go straight out the window.

“Which will prove,” Flash continued, unaware of Peter’s sudden realization about his problem, “that Parker’s a dirty, dirty liar!”

“I’m not a liar,” Peter said, his mouth running on autopilot.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Flash said, “at the Compound.”

Peter grimaced. Looking to Ned he found a sympathetic expression and a weak shrug. Peter turned to MJ. He appealed to her with ample use of eyebrow raises.

She sighed, but turned to Flash with her mouth open.

“What is your obsession with Peter?” MJ asked him, eyes half-lidded and expression judgmental.

Flash scoffed. “I don’t have an *obsession* with *Parker*!”

“Sure you do,” MJ informed him unemotionally. “You talk about him constantly, always try to be near him, go out of your way to make his life miserable. I mean, I don’t think you’re in love with him—”

Flash made a retching noise.

“Right,” MJ said, “but you’ve got *something* going on with Peter. You literally cannot go an *entire day* without saying his name.”

“Yes I could!” Flash snapped. “Penis means nothing to me! He’s just a loser!”

“Words hurt, Flash,” Peter told him in a steady tone. The only thing that showed his annoyance, and his growing upset with the situation, was a tiny twitch that pulsed on the corner of his right eyelid.

“You’re so juvenile,” Sue complained.

Tyler turned to Peter. “Does he call you Penis a lot?”

Peter mutely nodded.

Tyler turned to Flash. “Dude, I think MJ’s right. You’ve got some hang-up with Peter. Maybe you should—”

“No I don’t!” Flash yelled. “I’m not obsessed with stupid Peter Parker!”

“How have I never noticed?” Cindy asked. “I mean, I guess I was never in hearing distance.” She turned to Peter too. “I’m sorry I never realized you had a weird stalker.”

Peter made himself to keep a straight face to hide the smile, and hold back the laughter, that he could feel trying to force their way out at the way Flash’s face was turning darker, and darker shades of puce as he sputtered. Peter had been dealing with Flash for a while, and he knew he could keep dealing with it, but this sudden agreement from Cindy and Tyler that Flash was being a jerk was, well, nice. And also, hilarious.

“I’m not a stalker!” Flash almost howled. “I’m not stalking Parker! I don’t care about him! He’s just some nerd loser who thinks he’s smarter than everyone.”

That sobered Peter a little. “No I don’t!” he said, but Flash didn’t pay him any mind.

“Prove it then,” MJ told Flash. “If you can prove you’re *not* obsessed with Peter I’ll admit I was wrong.”

“I’m not obsessed!” Flash growled out.

“And yet I hear his name coming out of your mouth every five minutes,” MJ complained. “Do you think you could go even a *day* without saying Peter’s name?”

“Duh,” Flash said. “I could go my whole *life* without saying Parker’s name ever again!”

“Bzzzzz!” Ned buzzed. “You just said it!”

Flash’s face darkened another shade. “I. Can. Do. It.” Flash insisted through gritted teeth. “I’m not obsessed!”

“Then don’t say his name for the next *month*,” MJ said. “Think you can do that?”

Flash scoffed. “That’s easy!”

MJ put her hand out. “Shake on it?”

Flash put his hand out and almost grasped hers, but at the last minute pulled back. “What about if a teacher or whoever asks a *direct* question, where the answer is Parker?”

“I’ll allow that as an exception,” MJ said, “but you can only say his name. Nothing rude about him. Deal?”

Flash shook her hand. “Deal.”

“Good,” MJ said, “now look forward to not asking about Peter’s internship while on the field trip because unfortunately, that’s less than a month away.”

Flash sputtered, and this time Peter couldn’t help but laugh.

“Fine,” Flash said, “but mark my words, I’ll prove that P— that *his* internship is fake *somehow*,” and then he swung his bag over his shoulder and marched out of the room.

“I wish he got that fired up about debate,” Sally said, and suddenly the speculation and conversations were over, and everyone was filing out of the room and out of the school.

“Bye losers,” MJ said as she parted ways from Ned and Peter. She was going to some poetry reading with her father and seemed quietly excited about it. “And, Peter? You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” Peter said, realizing belatedly that he hadn’t said it before.

MJ smirked, gave a final wave of her hand, and stalked off.

“What are *you* up to tonight?” Ned asked Peter as they walked towards the courtyard in front of the school.”

“Lab stuff,” Peter said. “I’m gonna wait here till Happy picks me up. What about you?”

“Homework,” Ned said, and then with a bounce and a smile, added, “and then dinner with the grandparents.”

“Sounds nice,” Peter said. He approached a bench and sat upon it, and Ned sat with him. Peter gave him a look.

“I’m being nice and waiting with you, my best friend,” Ned said. “It’s not that I’m avoiding doing homework. This is unrelated to homework.”

Peter laughed. “Thank you for the company, then.”

Ned sat beside Peter and put his bag by his feet, and then with an excitement that Peter realized had been well-hidden until now, Ned burst out, “What’s the tour going to be like?!”

And just like that Peter’s good mood evaporated.

“I don’t *know*, Ned!”

“But you live there!” Ned insisted. “You’ve got to know *something*.”

Peter sighed. “They don’t even think I’ll be in the building when it happens. It’s, what, on a Friday? I’m supposed to be in school, Ned. All they told me is they’ll give me a heads up before any tour so I can get my junk out of the dying room— er, the, uh, formal living room. I don’t have any, like, real details.”

More quietly Ned said, “You didn’t... tell them? I... I thought you would have told, uh, Mr. Stark at least that you’re going.” Peter didn’t respond, and Ned tried again, growing even more quiet. “Why *didn’t* you tell them?”

Peter let out a long sigh and scrubbed a hand down his face. “I just—” he cut himself off with a guttural exhalation, sighed, and then tried again. “I don’t want them to know I’m coming. I don’t want to make a big deal of it. I— I never expected we’d actually *win* the— that stupid essay competition. If I had I wouldn’t have mentioned it to anyone!”

“But *why*?” Ned asked plaintively. His grip tightened on the straps of his backpack, and he was giving Peter his utmost, undivided attention, and Peter found himself, in the face of such focus, stuttering out his reasons, feeling less and less sure of himself as he spoke.

“First of all,” Peter said, “Flash.”

“What about Flash?” Ned asked.

“He’s a menace! He’s *convinced* my internship with SI is fake, and he’s constantly trying to convince everyone else in the whole *school* that he’s right and I’m a liar, and I don’t want to even deal with any of that.”

“We’re not going to Stark Industries,” Ned said, like he was imparting Peter with some powerful knowledge.

Peter rolled his eyes. “I know! I know. But, he was right, earlier. SI and the Avengers Compound are, well, connected. And he’s probably going to go out of his way to find out if my internship is real, and, and that’ll *out* me. If any of the employees at the compound find out I’m *there*, for a tour... they’ll tell Tony, and he’ll tell the Avengers, and then they might *show up*, and...” he trailed off.

“So, which is it?” Ned asked patiently. “Are you worried about Flash? Or Mr. Stark and the Avengers?”

“Flash,” Peter said, a little too quick, and then to hide that fact, tacked on, “duh.”

Ned shrugged. “Then I don’t see what the problem is. If he tries to find out if your internship is real—which I don’t think he will, by the way, after that verbal beat down MJ gave him back there—all he’ll find out is that it *is* real. Which, isn’t that good? It’ll prove to him, and the class, that you *weren’t* lying. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“But if he asks *anyone* about me, they’re, well, they’re going to notice I’m there. And I think I just about figured out how to get away with not being recognized while at the compound, but it involves evasion and hiding my face, and all of that will go out the window if Flash starts *asking* about me and throwing my name all over the place!”

“Why does it *matter* if they know you’re there?” Ned asked. “I swear, you’re worse than my Uncle Danilo.”

“The Uncle who works at NYU or the Uncle who does glass sculpting?” Peter asked.

“The professor,” Ned said. “My Uncle Jacob is the glass blower, and he doesn’t even live around here, Peter. *And* he can actually get to the point. Uncle Danilo just circles and circles and circles and it takes forever to get to the end of *any* story. And, Peter, you’re doing the same thing!”

“No I’m not,” Peter said, affronted.

“Yes you *are*,” Ned insisted. “I asked you why you didn’t tell Mr. Stark, and you said you didn’t want him to know you’re going to be there—which is obvious, by the way, if you didn’t tell him—and I asked *why*, and your very roundabout answer turned out to be that you didn’t want them to know you’re going to be there. That’s not an answer, Peter, you just talked yourself in a circle! Now, you’re not allowed to use Flash as a crutch because as we’ve already mentioned, even your issue with Flash being a jerk circles back around to Mr. Stark and the rest of the Avengers not finding out you’re going to be there. So: Why?”

Peter let out a rough sigh. “I just— I don’t want them to interact with me in front of, like, *everyone*!”

“Not everyone,” Ned said, “just the decathlon team. And Mr. Harrington. What, that’s like, twelve people if we’re including the alternates and Mr. Harrington? Which of course we are. No matter how much I’d love for Flash not to be invited because he’s not a regular competitor, that’d be excluding other, nicer people too. So what if twelve people see an Avenger talking with you casually?” Ned shrugged. “That’d be cool! *And* it would prove to Flash that you have that internship!”

“It’d also prove to everyone that I *live there*,” Peter said.

“How?” Ned asked, and then without waiting for an answer, continued, “No it wouldn’t!”

“Maybe not,” Peter ceded, “but it *could* come up in conversation. And I don’t want the school knowing I live with the Avengers! I don’t want my normal life all turned on its head or whatever! I want to just be normal, regular Peter Parker at school. Not Ward-of-Earth’s-Mightiest-Heroes or whatever.”

“They wouldn’t out you like that,” Ned said, but it was the first time he didn’t sound like what he was stating was a law of the universe. He didn’t sound *unsure*, he just didn’t sound like that was a hard and fast fact. “The Avengers know you wouldn’t like having your living situation in everyone’s mouth. Like when Mr. Stark agreed to drop you off at school *secretly*. He does that for a reason: so no one knows. They wouldn’t mess that up.”

“They wouldn’t mean to,” Peter said, “but—” he shook his head. “I don’t know. I just, I guess I could have made a big deal out of it, told everyone I was on one of the tours and to please play it cool, but... I guess I just didn’t want to make a big deal out of it! Wouldn’t it be easier if none of them knew? I wouldn’t be asking them to change their behavior. And it shouldn’t even matter anyway because I asked them if they were going to meet the tour groups and they said no. So—”

“They said no?” Ned asked plaintively.

Peter awkwardly shook his head.

“Aww man,” Ned said, “I was really hoping to meet the Avengers! That’d be, like, super cool!”

Peter resolved to have Ned over at the Compound sometime so he could properly geek out over the Avengers in person.

“Yeah,” Peter said slowly. “But, so, it shouldn’t even matter if I tell them I’m coming or not,

because we're not even going to see them, and if I do say I'm coming they might decide to visit after all, and then the whole issue with them pretending they don't all know me *very* well, and... you know... it just seems like a lot. And it can all be avoided if no one knows I'm touring my own home."

Ned made an unconvinced noise. "If you say so, Peter. To me it sounds like unnecessary manipulation and planning, since, as you say, they won't even be there, but if you insist on keeping it a secret I'm not going to stop you."

"It's not like I'll hide it forever!" Peter said. "I'll, like, tell them after it happens!"

"And I'm sure Mr. Stark will love that," Ned said drily.

Peter frowned at Ned, and Ned put up his hands in surrender.

"Fine, fine," Ned said, "do what you want. I just think you're over thinking it all."

Peter sighed. "I don't want to be thinking about it at all, to be honest. We've got semi-finals coming up, *and* I'm not doing so hot in English, and Aunt May's on my case about that, so..."

Ned laughed. "We've got a lot on our plate, don't we?"

Peter sighed. "Too much."

"So," Ned said, "what *do* you think we're going to see on the field trip, if not the Avengers?"

"Ned!" Peter exclaimed, but couldn't help but do so with a laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if there are any major plot/grammar/spelling errors. I realized I hadn't posted anything in a while and so I tried to write something relatively quickly, but I've been busy and motivationless lately so I'm not sure, objectively, how good anything is. I hope you enjoyed it nonetheless :D

An order of lies with a side order of lies. And make the lies extra crispy

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween!

(I still have two hours until midnight where I am so I'm still counting today as Halloween)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter was sitting on the couch in the living room with his feet curled beneath him, half watching Steve and Thor getting completely destroyed by Wanda and Bruce at Wii Tennis, and half quizzing himself on the subjects he knew would be mentioned at the National Decathlon semi-finals.

He was mostly watching Wanda and Bruce wipe the floor with Steve and Thor though. Studying, while necessary, was, at the moment, super boring, at least in comparison to the Wii game.

"I call next game!" Peter said as Bruce hit a particularly nasty lob right over Wii-Steve's head.

"Are you finished studying?" Steve asked, his voice more strained and breathless from exercise than he ever sounded out on the field (what few interactions Peter had allowed Captain America to have with Spiderman, for fear of Steve (or any Avenger) recognizing Peter's voice).

Peter debated lying to the man.

"Finish studying first," Steve said, obviously drawing the right conclusions from Peter's hesitation.

"Aww," Peter said, and tried to make himself absorb the notes on the note cards faster.

"Hey everyone," Tony's voice said seconds before the man himself made an appearance in the room. "We're having a little meeting and Pep said— Go Wanda! That was a fucking ace volley. Damn, you're really destroying Thor, aren't you? Hey Point Break, do you want, like, tennis lessons or something? You're kinda dying out there."

"Indeed I might take you up on that offer," Thor said as Wanda paused the game. "Though I believe your offer was in jest. I can't seem to quite accomplish the moves in the way that I intend." He swung his arm, gripping the comparatively tiny Wii remote at an angle that looked uncomfortable and awkward, to say the least.

"Well, I'll have someone set something up for you," Tony said, looking like he was trying to hold back laughter.

"I thank you mightily," Thor intoned solemnly.

"Now," Wanda interjected, "Pepper wanted to tell us something?"

"Right," Tony said with a shake of his head, and then he clapped his hands twice and said, "Off to the formal living room with ye. I still have more of us to round up but we're having a 'family meeting,' so I'll see you all again as soon as I rustle up the rest of this boy band."

And then he wandered off.

“Off to the formal living room then?” Steve asked.

“The dying room,” Peter agreed.

“Peter,” Steve chided, but not very harshly.

“I’m sure we have time to finish up this game,” Bruce offered politely.

“Oh no,” Steve said, his voice also polite, “I’d hate to leave Ms. Potts waiting. We should go right away.”

Less subtly Thor reached towards the mass of game consoles on the shelf beneath the wide screen tv and ripped the Wii off the shelf, pulling the cord out of the wall in the process.

“Oops,” Thor said with not a single iota of self-consciousness.

Bruce sighed. “Alright, let’s go to Pepper.”

Peter shoved his note cards in his pocket and stood up.

“Next time,” Wanda hissed at Thor as the five filed out of the room, “I will destroy your entire ass.”

“I wish you luck in that, fair warrior,” Thor said, “but soon I will be formally trained in the bloody art of tennis, and in fact, I shall destroy *your* ass.”

Wanda laughed. “Tough chance.”

In the dying room (which perpetually looked like it had been ripped straight out of a home decorating magazine—perfect, pristine, and un-lived in; this season a sea of pale grays and whites, with wood fixtures, and small accents of red thrown in for contrast) Pepper was standing, waiting for them in the middle of the plush throw rug that was the impossibly bright white of a carpet never stained by dirt or food, and therefore a carpet that had not been in this compound for longer than a few days. She’d already changed out of her day clothes, and was standing there in yoga pants, a loose tunic, and bare feet, but she still radiated the sense of professionalism and power that always amazed Peter.

Rhodey was sitting in an armchair already, texting on his phone, and Natasha and Vision were chatting, sitting on either end of one of the two long couches, several empty cushions between them. Thor sat himself in the vast space between Natasha and Vision and began telling them, loudly, about his and Steve’s failure to beat Bruce and Wanda in Wii Tennis. He spoke boisterously, in a tone that made it seem he was proud of his failure.

Peter took a corner seat on the unoccupied couch and pulled out his note cards, though he didn’t even bother looking at them. Steve and Bruce joined him on the couch.

Pepper checked her watch.

“What’s this about?” Wanda asked her as she took an armchair closest to Vision.

Pepper waved her hand. “Nothing to worry about, but I know if I start explaining now I’ll just have to restart when—”

She was cut off by the sound of loud whooping coming from down the hall, and then Clint and Sam burst through the door, Sam first by mere inches, and they both collapsed on the floor, limbs

tangled together, breathless.

“I!” Clint started, sounding winded, and then huffed before completing the thought, “Won!”

“You. Didn’t!” Sam insisted, also huffing.

“I’m. Superior. Bird!” Clint said, catching his breath a little, but not enough to be able to speak fluidly without taking short breaths to huff and puff.

“I call. Fowl!” Sam breathed out, angrily, and then immediately broke down laughing, which made him sound all the more winded.

Clint joined him, laughing breathlessly on the floor.

“What is wrong with you both?” Natasha asked.

“They’re too similar is the problem,” Steve said, laughing lightly.

“How dare you!” Clint said, his voice crackling.

“We’re nothing alike!” Sam agreed, sounding not nearly as bad as Clint.

“I don’t know,” Peter said, “You both seem to be birds of a feather.”

“No more puns,” Wanda said, “I beg of you.”

“What’s going on?” a rough voice asked from the door, and Peter’s eyes flew to see Bucky standing in the doorway, blocked from entry by the two collapsed bird-themed heroes.

“With the meeting or the laughing goons on the floor?” Steve asked.

Bucky eyed Clint and Sam and then took a giant step over them, barely making it into the room without clocking Sam with his steel-toed boot, but he ended up on the inside of the room with no one more damaged than they’d already been.

“The goons,” Bucky said. He strode over to the couch Steve was sitting at and took up position behind Steve, standing with legs spread and arms crossed over his chest. He looked very serious, even considering the fact that he was wearing an oversized pastel pink sweatshirt with a stylized avocado on it.

“I don’t know,” Steve admitted, “they just collapsed through the door.”

“They were racing,” Natasha said, “and Sam won.”

“Nuh-uh!” Clint said. “*I* won!”

“Sorry, Clint,” Bruce said, “Nat’s right. Sam was through the door first.”

This proof of his success gave Sam enough energy to (with effort) get to his feet and whoop, loudly and happily, over Clint.

Clint very maturely stuck his tongue out at him.

“Are we all here?” Tony asked, stepping into the room as well, and nudging Clint’s prone form with shoe, purposefully.

“Looks like it,” Pepper added. “Clint?”

“Fine,” Clint groaned and got to his feet before dragging himself down onto the couch next to Peter, pulling Sam, who was still doing his version of a touchdown dance, down beside him.

Tony sidled up to Pepper, and she very pointedly pushed him towards the seats. He rerouted without a word and forced himself between Peter and Clint.

“Budge up!” he said as he wiggled into place, forcing both Peter and Clint to scoot over. Peter, losing his elbow room, shoved his note cards blindly into his pants pocket.

“Sit somewhere else,” Clint complained as he moved to make room.

“*You* go sit somewhere else,” Tony countered.

“Boys,” Pepper said, her tone a warning, and they quieted. “Alright,” she started again, this time to a sufficiently quiet room. “Just wanted to let you all know that the first tour group will be coming through on Friday. This is the promised warning to clean up anything you don’t want to be seen by a mess of strangers.”

“Where will they be coming through?” Bruce asked.

“Not the bedrooms,” Tony said.

“I should hope not,” Natasha agreed.

“Yes, good,” Bruce said, “but should I make my lab civilian friendly, or...?”

Pepper looked at Tony and Tony shrugged. “I was going to let them into some of my not-classified labs, after, yes, Pepper, *thoroughly* cleaning them out beforehand. But if you don’t mind opening yours too, Bruce, I’m sure the group would love to see what a scientist like you gets up to.”

“I’d be honored,” Bruce said in that quiet, laid back way of his.

“Excellent,” Pepper said, pulling out her phone to send off a quick text. “That’ll be a perfect way to fluff out the tour. Might even make a good conversation piece for the journalist who will be with them.”

“Right,” Clint grouched. “I forgot there was going to be a tabloid writer, unsupervised, in our house.”

“Not tabloid, not unsupervised,” Tony piped up.

“We actually have a somewhat famous journalist working with the New York Times coming in. Joel Mitchell. He’s written for several publications, from the New York Times to the Los Angeles Times, and has a weekly segment on NPR. He’s in the middle of writing a book right now about life in a post-Chitauri world, and he’s already interviewed several heroes in New York with great feedback.

“Daredevil,” Tony named, “Reed Richards, Danny Rand. Even Professor X liked him.”

“He’s respectful,” Pepper said.

“Sounds boring,” Clint said.

“He’s prestigious,” Pepper continued with a sigh, “and he’ll mostly be observing, so don’t worry

about him too much.”

“How long are they going to be here?” Bucky asked.

“The journalist?” Tony asked.

“And the tour group,” Bucky said, very judgmentally. “Keep up.”

Tony stuck his tongue out at the man.

“Almost all day,” Pepper said, “but, that doesn’t mean you can’t have a fairly normal day. I’m not going to make you all hide in your own rooms all day. I’ll send out an itinerary so no one surprises you in the gym or wherever.”

Bucky made a humming noise in the back of his throat that doubled as a noise of agreement.

Pepper took a scrap of notepaper from her pocket, looked at it and said, “I think that’s all.”

“That’s it?” Clint whined. “You could have sent out a mass text! I didn’t have to leave my *very important project* for—”

“You were decorating cupcakes,” Sam said.

“Exactly,” Clint said.

“I want cupcakes,” Wanda said.

With more emphasis, Clint said, “*Exactly!*”

“Yes,” Pepper said, “but in person I can make sure you’re all paying attention. This is happening on Friday.”

“What’s happening on Friday?” Rhodey asked, looking up from his phone.

Pepper pointed at Rhodey with a sharp, dangerous looking finger.

With a laugh, Rhodey held his hands up in surrender and said, “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Some tour is coming Friday, I heard.”

“Good,” Pepper said with fervor. “It’s important this goes well. We need the good press.”

No one else in the room seemed as convinced as she did, but no one openly disagreed either.

“Ok,” Pepper said, “any questions?”

No one said anything but her gaze intensified, and Peter found himself opening his mouth just out of the sheer need to not let her down.

“Who’s giving the tour?” he asked, and belatedly tried to make himself seem uninterested, and not like he desperately wanted to know.

“Oh,” Pepper said, sounding unnecessarily delighted by the question. “Yes! You actually haven’t met her yet, have you, Peter?”

Peter blinked at Pepper. He was both confused and oddly hopeful. Someone he hadn’t met was giving the tour? “Who?” he asked, before his brain could do anything useless like combust out of

sheer excitement at the mere *possibility* of this all working out fine after all.

“Her name’s Sophie,” Pepper said. “She’s Jay and Donna’s new,” she squinted, “intern? Assistant?” She shrugged. “I’ll have to take another look at the paperwork. She *had* been an intern in the HR department of Stark Industries, and got rave reviews. A couple months back she applied to work at the compound instead.”

“Claimed it was a shorter commute than going into the city,” Tony spoke up. “Personally I just think she’s a fan of the Avengers.”

“Who isn’t?” Peter asked.

“Hydra,” Clint said.

“Well, yes,” Peter said, “but I wasn’t counting Nazis.”

Clint shrugged in a *have it your way* manner.

“So,” Peter said, looking back at Pepper. “Sophie?”

“Yes,” Pepper said. “She’s exceptionally bright. Donna has nothing but good things to say, and Sophie only started a month back. Jay wanted to do the tour, he’s been planning it so vigorously, but he really can’t be pulled away from dealing with the backlash of the, ehm, Taylor Moreau incident.”

The *Taylor Moreau Incident* (a phrase that had been uttered often in the compound over the past few weeks) concerned a woman (the Taylor Moreau in question), who was suing Steve for not paying child support. She claimed she gave birth to Steve’s son in 2003 (a frankly impossible feat considering Steve, at the supposed time of conception, was frozen in an iceberg, and wouldn’t be thawed out for another eight years), and he hadn’t paid child support since 2005 (another impossible feat, see above). So, according to Ms. Moreau, Steve owed her more than a decade’s worth of Child Support, and despite the ridiculousness of the situation, had taken her claims to both a lawyer and the media. All reputable sources had of course ignored her claims, but there were enough tabloids willing to publish her tripe that the *Taylor Moreau Incident* needed constant attention.

Peter surreptitiously looked at Steve whose expression had suddenly turned stony.

Steve wasn’t especially pleased with the *Taylor Moreau Incident*.

Understandably.

“So we’re having a newbie run the tour?” Clint asked.

“She’s not that new,” Pepper said, at the same time that Natasha said, “She’s highly qualified.”

Pepper blinked at Nat. “I didn’t know you’d met her.”

Natasha blinked at Pepper. Just once.

“Oh,” Pepper said, “Of course, how silly of me. I forgot you’ve got everyone who walks through our doors triple background checked.”

“You’re welcome,” Natasha said, even though neither Pepper’s words nor her tone had been the least bit grateful-sounding.

Pepper kept a serious, verging on disappointed look on her face for all of three seconds before she broke and grinned at Nat.

“Also,” Nat said, “I did meet her. Last week. We went out for coffee. We’re now BFFs.”

Only Peter’s advanced sense of sight allowed him to see Tony’s eye twitch at Natasha’s suddenly artificially chipper tone.

“Natalie Rushman?” Tony asked drily. Peter blinked. He could assume that *Natalie Rushman* was one of Natasha’s aliases (she was a spy after all), and a rather flimsy, similar-to-Natasha’s-real-name one at that, but Tony’s tone made him think that later, perhaps in private, he should ask Tony about why saying that name made him sound just a tinge dread-filled.

“Cathleen Dunlap,” Nat said. She pushed her bottom lip out into a pout and shyly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and suddenly she seemed so much younger, so much more approachable.

“And where does Cathleen work?” Wanda asked. “Is she also Jay and Donna’s associate?”

“No,” Natasha said, quietly, sounding without an ounce of confidence. “She actually just left SI. Graduated NYU and got accepted at SI’s LA offices. She’s excited to visit the west coast, but scared of moving so far away.”

“Damn that’s creepy,” Rhodey said, half astounded, half exhausted, and it was Rhodey’s response that made Peter crack up.

Natasha’s Cathleen-expression morphed back into her real face and she smiled at Peter.

“Very well,” Sam said, “we’ve got our resident spider’s backing. Guess we can trust this Sophie.”

The reference to a spider almost made Peter look at Sam, but he caught himself in time and made himself, instead, hold himself very, very still.

“You know SI has a very strict background check, right?” Tony asked Natasha.

“Not as strict as my contacts, or my own judgment,” Natasha responded sweetly.

“Nat knows everyone who knows anyone,” Clint said.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “And I already have all of them on a payroll,” Tony pointed out.

“Anyway,” Rhodey interrupted. “Not that this who-knows-who pissing contest isn’t enlightening, but can we get on with this?” He looked at Pepper. “What else do we need to know about this Sophie?”

“Nothing,” Pepper said. “She’ll be doing her job, she knows what to do, just tidy up the formal area and we should be good.”

“Great,” Rhodey said. “Well, then, I’m off,” and he made for the door.

Peter couldn’t blame him. Rhodey was still military even if he wasn’t technically part of the air force anymore, and he kept everything spick and span. Honestly, the only ones who’d really need to pick up after themselves were Clint and Peter, and maybe Tony, but honestly he kept most of his mess down in his labs and Peter couldn’t imagine Tony wouldn’t have had that area cleaned already, since he was pretty sure Tony had planned on taking them down there for a while.

Pepper let him go, and with that allowance as permission, the rest of the Avengers started filing out

as well.

Peter hesitated on the way out, and Tony ruffled his hair as he passed him, out into the hall. “You alright there, Pete?”

Peter nodded.

“Good,” Tony said. “You’ve seemed kind of nervous about this whole tour business.”

“Have I?” Peter said, and hopefully succeeded in keeping his voice level.

“Yeah,” Tony said, and gestured for Peter to follow him out of the dying room, and out into the hall and back towards the living room where Peter could already hear Thor bellowing about the minuteness of the wii-mote and his belief in his ability to gain honor in the forthcoming challenge of wii bowling. “I know it may be uncomfortable having strangers walk through your home,” Tony continued, drawing Peter’s attention back from the yelling of the game-obsessed god, “but Sophie really is very good. She’ll make sure no one runs off and finds your bedroom and misarranges your star wars memorabilia.”

Peter shook his head. “I know that’s not an issue. FRIDAY wouldn’t let any stranger into any room they’re not supposed to be in.”

Tony hummed. “Then what’s got your knickers in a twist, Pete?”

Peter thought about how to answer. He couldn’t exactly say he was nervous because in a few days time he’d be coming to the compound with the same tour everyone was preparing for, and that he was anxious that he’d let something slip and either his classmates would find out he *lived* here, or his friends and roommates (Avengers) would find out that he failed to tell them that he was coming, and want to know what all the hiding was about. Because, well, if he said that then Tony would know he was coming, and then he’d tell the Avengers, and, well, the implications of that were obvious.

And, likewise, it didn’t make much sense for him to be worried about the tour group at all, because, well, according to what Tony thought, it didn’t affect Peter in the least.

What was a good, teenage thing to be nervous about?

“It’s just, we’ve got, you know, semi-finals coming up,” Peter said. He reached his hand into his pocket to pull out his note cards for verisimilitude but came up empty.

He stopped walking and frowned as he patted his pockets, as if his note cards might suddenly pop up on a different part of his body.

“What are you looking for?” Tony asked, coming to a stop as well.

“Note cards,” Peter said. “I swear I just had them. Where did they go?”

He patted his front pockets, back pockets, the almost-at-your-knee cargo pockets that didn’t actually exist in the pair of pants he was currently wearing, his torso, his arms.

Tony laughed at him. “That desperate to study, huh? You probably just left them in the living room, somewhere uncomfortably near that dangerous tennis game when you moved to the dying room. But you know, most kids your age wouldn’t be so *worried* over losing study material. You —”

Peter could see where this was going and dropped his hands from their fifth pat down of his front pockets in order to narrow his eyes at Tony. “You going to call me a nerd, Tony? Puh-leez. Don’t pretend that out of the two of us you aren’t the bigger nerd.”

Tony let out another bark of laughter. “Fine,” he said, “I’m a nerd and I respect your study habits. But you’ve been at it for hours. Why don’t we work on something else for... I don’t know, twenty minutes? Clear your mental palette for a while, and then you can go back to studying.”

“I really should study now. Semi-finals are this week,” Peter said, but without much conviction. He’d love a break.

“C’mon,” Tony said. “Twenty minutes? You can spare twenty minutes.”

Peter looked at him. “You’re a bad influence,” Peter said, smiling. “Steve would be ashamed if he knew.” Not that either of them planned on telling him. “What did you have in mind?”

Tony nodded towards the loud noises ahead of them. “Want to teach them how a master bowls?”

“Can six people even play a wii game at once?” Peter asked, not bothering to mention that he wouldn’t exactly call himself a master bowler.

“One,” Tony said, “I’m a tech genius, as are you, young padawan. No gaming console is safe from me. I can alter the maximum number of players allowed on any gaming system, no problem. I’m honestly offended. Do you even *know* me? But no, I didn’t mean *Wii* Bowling. I had a bowling alley built in the sub basement. Let’s get these losers down there and show them real bowling.”

“When did you get a *bowling alley* installed in the building?” Peter looked back and forth. “Wouldn’t we have noticed the construction?”

“Oh,” Tony said with a wave of his hand, “that’s been there forever.” He eyed Peter playfully. “You’ve never seen it?”

Peter eyed Tony back. “I can’t tell if you’re messing with me or not.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re no fun. Fine, I had it put in as something to show off to the possible tour groups oh, some months ago. But the contractors were SI internal hires and they know how to finish a project in a reasonable amount of time. So. Bowling alley?”

There was a secret bowling alley in the basement— sub basement— of the place where Peter lived? “Heck yeah!” he said, pushing thoughts of studying from his head. “Wait, do the others know?”

Tony had an unholy gleam in his eyes as he shook his head, slowly, in the negative.

Peter beamed. “Can I be the one to tell them?”

“Why Peter,” Tony said, starting back towards the living room, “of course.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was going to be more, but I wasn't really vibing with the part that comes after this, so I cut it here, but most of that stuff is already written so I'm hoping posting this chapter will kick my ass into gear and I'll have the next chapter out within the

week :D

I hope everyone had, or is having, a fun and safe Halloween, and if you're an adult in the US of A, please go out and vote. Early voting is still going on, if you have a mail-in ballot don't mail it, drop it off at a drop-off location, and if you're voting on voting day, don't forget to look up what your voting precinct is :D

Just remember, it coulda been Nickleback

Chapter Notes

I really could have vibed with this chapter harder, but I was desperate to release into the world! And now it's here :D

Friday broke bright and early. The Academic Decathlon team met at the school several hours before zero period because the bus ride to the compound would take an hour and a half minimum, but probably closer to two. Peter arrived on time, for once, but that was because he'd spent the night at Ned's, and Ned's mom drove the two of them to school to make sure they got there safe. Arriving at school in the dead of pre-dawn light, at six in the morning, was one of the most disgusting things Peter had ever had to do.

The sleepover had been the only way he could think of to not alert the Avengers that something strange was going on. If Tony had to fly Peter to school at six in the morning, one, he'd be pissed, but two, he'd want to know why, and Peter *could* have lied, but avoidance was easier and didn't leave such a sour taste in his mouth. And Ned's moms liked him well enough to agree without too much hassle, even if it *was* a school night.

They didn't even stay up that late chatting like they usually would. Which didn't mean that they weren't exhausted when they got to school. None of the other students seemed much awake either, and Mr. Harrington was clutching a travel thermos like it was the only thing between him and an early death.

Flash didn't even have the energy to make a nuisance of himself, though that could also be chalked up to the bet he'd made with MJ. Flash had been mostly less annoying for the whole week so far, and Peter was *loving* it. He'd probably be loving it more now if the early morning didn't make his whole existence ache and his eyes burn.

Almost all of them slept through the bus ride. Peter certainly did, as much as he could with Ned continuously nodding off onto his shoulder. The few times during the ride that he cracked his eyes open he found MJ either reading or laughing silently at him. Between the feel of his friends near him and the low-level vibrations of the bus on the highway, Peter felt almost comfortable. He was able to, for the time being, forget that in less than a few hours time he'd be back at home, trying to pretend— to convince everyone around him that this was, in fact, *not* his home.

And then, with a jerk, the bus came to a stop and Peter started awake.

"We're here, sleepyheads," MJ said to Peter and Ned, and Peter looked outside to find that, indeed, two hours had already passed, the sun was up in the sky, and the compound was glittering before them, a structure of glass and steel, and somewhere on the bus a voice *oohhh*'d in obvious awe and wonder.

"Already?" Ned asked, his voice cracking, and then his head was around Peter's shoulder, looking out of the window next to him. "Wow," he said. And then oh so quietly, just for Peter, he added, "You live here?"

Peter nodded.

This time Ned's "wow" was lower, and longer, and more awed than before.

"C'mon losers," MJ said in her normal brusque tones, breaking the hazy quiet of the bus, and then they started filing off, the whole team, led by a much more awake and boisterous Mr. Harrington.

Waiting for them outside was a young woman in professional looking slacks and a jewel tone blouse who greeted them with a smile. "Hi, everyone," she said. "You must be the lucky winners of our little competition. Midtown School of Science and Technology's Academic Decathlon team, am I right?" Without waiting for more than a few scattered nods she said, "Congratulations!"

"Thank you for having us," Mr. Harrington said, coming up to her and holding out his hand.

She shook it. "It's our pleasure. You must be the chaperone, Mr. Harrington, correct?"

"Yes," Mr. Harrington said. "Chaperone and Academic Decathlon Coach."

"I'm Sophie Jackson," the woman said. She looked past Mr. Harrington to wave at everyone. "You can just call me Sophie, though. I'll be your tour guide today, so if you have any questions throughout the tour, please feel free to ask me." She waited, perhaps to see if anyone would actually ask any questions, but no one did.

Peter had already situated himself between Ned and MJ, and was very subtly hunching, trying to keep himself out of the line of sight of any other employees they may pass. That morning he'd dressed himself in clothes he hardly ever wore, topped by a hoodie he'd borrowed from Ned which was a doubly excellent disguise, if it were to come down to it, because it was a color (a bright, chartreuse-y yellow-green) he'd never willingly choose for himself, and was several sizes larger than his own clothes and therefore perfect for hiding his own body shape. He didn't have the hood up yet, if Mr. Harrington caught him wearing a hood indoors the man would make him take it off, but he was ready to, at a moment's notice, flick it up to cover his head and shade his face from view.

Move over Natasha Romanoff [and Natalie Rushman, and Cathleen Dunlap]. With Peter's new prowess at disguise he was the new best Spy in town.

Not really.

At all!

But still, he'd practiced flipping the hood up in the mirror several times the night before, and he was pretty sure he could do it fluidly now with little effort.

"Alright," Sophie said, "well, our first stop today is the lobby of the compound." She turned and led the way inside as she spoke. "This entrance is used almost exclusively by staff and visitors, despite the fact that this entrance is the grand, main one." The group passed through the doors and into a large, spacious room made of metal and glass. A receptionist's desk sat unattended to one side of the room, but two men leaned against the desk, one looking at the door behind the desk which stood a little ajar, and the other looking outward at the great expansive emptiness that was the compound's lobby.

"Is that true?" Ned whispered, leaning in close to Peter's ear.

Peter nodded. "Usually we come in from an elevator in the garage, or straight up to the second floor in the back." Depending of course if his ride had been Happy's car or Tony's Iron Man suit.

"The residents of the building," Sophie continued, and at the sudden interest in her words she said,

“Yes, by residents I *do* mean the Avengers, but I also mean some regular, high-level staff, and visiting heroes or friends. They all enter through a personal entrance available only to them.” Peter noticed she didn’t specify where the entrance was. So far it seemed as if Donna and Jay had trained her well. A consummate professional.

They stopped in the middle of the room and Sophie gestured to the two men. “I’m sure you all know already, but we have a journalist and a photographer here for the tour as well. Joel Mitchell writes pieces for the New York Times and NPR,” the man facing the desk turned around to give them a half-hearted wave before turning back to the desk, “and Tao Chen has been a photographer for National Geographic for several years, and is currently working with a local author for pieces for a book called, ‘Embroided; a look into the lies the American government has been feeding its people for fifty-eight years.’” The other man smiled and waved as well, though this man’s expression was much friendlier.

A famous journalist and a famous photographer. It seemed a bit overhyped to Peter. Did they need a famous journalist and photographer just to work on this fluff piece about a field trip? He wondered, then, if Pepper had really thought this out.

Well, whatever. He knew Tony had kind of a “My money can buy the best so why not buy the best,” attitude towards life. Perhaps Tony had been the one to hire these two.

Sophie turned her attention to the two men. “Are you waiting for security tags?”

Tao nodded. “She said she’d be right back.”

Sophie hummed, told Peter’s class “I’ll be right back, wait here,” and walked around the reception desk to step through the door behind it, which stood slightly ajar.

Immediately his teammates started gossiping.

“This is so exciting!” Ned whispered to Peter, loud enough for MJ to hear as well.

“It’s a good thing we won semi-finals,” MJ said, “or your excitement right now would be misplaced.”

“C’mon MJ,” Peter said, “let Ned have his fun. Plus, you never thought for a minute we wouldn’t win.”

MJ raised an imperious eyebrow as if to say that with Peter’s lack of skill she hadn’t been sure of anything. Which was quite rude and frankly untrue. Peter knew that MJ, deep down, believed in them all.

Sophie returned holding a small box, and on her heels was Jenna, a person who would definitely recognize Peter, as she’d been the receptionist on duty almost all of the times he’d deigned to come down to the lobby (which wasn’t really that often, but Jenna *would* recognize him.)

Peter turned his body and took a half-step back until he could no longer see Jenna, and Jenna could no longer see him.

“Here you gentleman go,” Peter heard Jenna say to Joel and Tao. “Just clip them to your lapels and you should be good to go anywhere Sophie takes you.”

Sophie meanwhile had arrived back at her place in front of Peter’s team and had started handing out lanyards with white cards hanging off them.

“Guest IDs,” Sophie explained. “We all have IDs here, all the employees at least, and if you’re caught walking around the building without an HR-approved ID—” Peter translated this in his mind to *Friday-approved*, “there could be a problem. So please keep these on till the end of the tour.”

“They just say ‘Guest,’” Yasmin said.

“They’re not individualized,” Sophie said. “Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Chen are getting ones identical to yours.” Indeed, when Peter looked over to the journalist and photographer, the cards they had clipped to their collars also just said ‘Guest.’ He guessed that the reason they got clips and the teens got lanyards was because the teens weren’t expected to have lapels on which to clip the cards.

“But,” Sophie continued, “they’ll allow access anywhere I’m allowed to go. You see, there’s a chip in the back of each card.”

“Cool,” Charles oohed.

“So what?” Flash asked. “Are we all going to have to swipe our cards every time we go through a door or what?”

“No,” Sophie said. “This building is run by an AI. She can tell how many people are in a general area, and the chips in your cards have a radio frequency that also gives her an alert. If she senses eight people in a room, and knows that there are also eight IDs, then she doesn’t raise an alarm. If she senses eight people trying to access a room but only four of those people have IDs, or even just IDs with the appropriate clearance level, she won’t allow access. So please keep your IDs on you at all times or you won’t be able to pass through the doors.”

Cindy’s hand went up and Sophie called on her. “You called the AI ‘her?’” she said in a questioning tone.

“Yes,” Sophie said, “Our AI’s name is FRIDAY. She runs the building.” And then a little louder she said, “FRIDAY? Would you like to say hi?”

“Hello,” came FRIDAY’s lilt from hidden speakers around the room. “I’m happy to welcome Midtown’s Academic Decathlon team. If you have any issues, feel free to call on me.”

And then she was gone.

Peter had a moment of panic where he suddenly remembered that FRIDAY would obviously recognize him, *had already recognized him*. There was no way he wouldn’t be recognized. She knew him. She knew *everything*. Would she out him? Obviously she wasn’t going to just start talking to him at that very moment. She already hadn’t so he must be safe for now. She wouldn’t say anything to him in front of his classmates, unless he prompted her, so he was safe on that front, but would she tell Tony? Or any of the other Avengers?

He took a deep breath, let it out, and tried to think.

No, she wouldn’t. At least, not unless they prompted her to. She wasn’t one to volunteer information like that.

He was fine.

Now he’d just have to remember not to talk to her himself. He was so comfortable with just asking the AI for information, he’d have to keep a tight lid on that tendency of his to make sure he didn’t

out himself to his classmates.

“We won’t be bothering FRIDAY too much,” Sophie said. “She’s mostly Mr. Stark’s AI. But, enough technicalities. If everyone has their ID on them,” she looked over the group, and seeing that everyone had slipped the lanyard over their heads, said, “then we can get started! Our first stop of the day is a little museum of Avengers items that we put together *just* for you. Come this way.”

She started marching off towards where Peter knew the conference rooms were located (they had two, and were mostly used for when the Avengers needed a meeting space with someone who was not an avenger, or a table big enough to lie down on top of [Clint Barton]). The team followed with Joel and Tao bringing up the rear.

Peter, Ned, and MJ were near the back as well, not because they were uninterested in the tour (though Peter was also pleased that it put him as far away from the Compound employee as possible) but because Flash had taken up a place right behind Sophie and even though Flash couldn’t say his name, that didn’t mean Peter wanted to spend any time even *near* the man.

“This is so lit already!” Ned said. “I mean, an Avengers Museum? A special one made just for this tour? I’m going to explode!”

“Please don’t explode,” Peter said.

“So what angle were you thinking?” Tao asked from a few steps behind Peter. He’d lowered his voice, so obviously his words were just for Joel, but Joel didn’t answer. “For the article?” Tao prompted. “I’m thinking I can get some stills at the museum, but if I knew what angle *you* were going for I could—”

“Shut up!” Joel hissed.

Peter could hear Tao’s teeth snap shut, and then he said. “I’m sorry?”

“I don’t need you bothering me,” Joel said quietly, his tone verging toward anger.

“What’s got you so pissed?” Tao asked.

“Just shut up and let me work,” Joel snapped, and then sped up to walk around Peter, Ned, and MJ, and up closer to Sophie.

“What the fuck’s wrong with *him*?” Tao asked himself.

“I think we’re almost there!” Ned said, bringing Peter back to himself.

It looked like maybe the journalist and the photographer weren’t on good terms. Oh well, Peter thought with a shake of his head, that wasn’t Peter’s problem.

“Wonder what’s going to be in there?” MJ murmured.

Peter shrugged.

“Here we are,” Sophie said as she reached a large oak door with a plaque that said, “Conference Room A.” Peter knew that if they were to keep going down the hall they’d reach the other conference room. That room helpfully had a plaque on it that said, “Conference Room 1.”

She opened the door and held it as the students filed in. “Feel free to explore. It isn’t much, but it’s all stuff that no other civilian has seen before. If you have any questions feel free to ask me or

FRIDAY.”

There were only twelve of them, fourteen if you were counting Joel and Tao, and soon enough they were all through the door and inside the conference room that looked absolutely nothing like a conference room. Peter didn’t go into the conference rooms much, he had no need to, but he’d been in them enough times to know that they were each supposed to house a large table, several dozen chairs, a sideboard, a projector and screen, and a variety of technological marvels, etcetera etcetera.

Instead the room looked like, well, a museum. All around the room were pedestals with various Avengers accoutrements. Plaques hung next to each item with paragraphs Peter assumed detailed what the items were. The lighting was low, the carpet was plush, no sideboard or chair or projector or *table* was in sight.

Peter had to say, he was impressed.

“Wow,” Ned said, wonder in his voice, as he stepped up to the first unoccupied item on display.

It sounded like Ned was impressed too.

The item Ned had stopped in front of was one of Clint’s old quivers, charred and cracked, but still one of Tony’s more impressive feats. Ned read the plaque and then “ooh”ed again.

“Are you going to do that for every item?” MJ asked as they stepped up to the next item, a torn cowl from the Captain America suit.

“Yes,” Ned said, his voice appropriately awe-filled. He turned back to the center of the room where Sophie was standing with Tao. Tao had his camera out and suddenly looked very serious and professional. “Miss Sophie?” Ned asked.

“Yes?” Sophie said, stepping closer. Once she’d moved, Peter could see that Mr. Harrington was also wandering around the room, taking in all the displays. He could also see Joel, barely paying attention to the students, standing in the doorway, his attention split between what was happening inside the little pop-up museum, and what was happening in the hall outside, which Peter could only assume was nothing.

“Can we take pictures?” Ned asked.

Sophie’s brow furrowed. “I... think so.” She said. “I’m sorry. You’re our first tour and we don’t have *quite* everything ironed out. I can’t imagine they’d put anything out that they strictly want to keep secret, but let me ask.” Peter was half expecting her to leave the room or talk into a mic or something, but instead she addressed the ceiling. “FRIDAY, are photographs allowed on this part of the tour?”

FRIDAY didn’t answer right away, but the pause was only long enough for her to get Tony or Pepper’s attention, ask the question and receive an answer. “Yes,” Friday said. “Photography is allowed in this room. Any further locations, please enquire again.”

“Ok,” Sophie said, and turning back to Ned, she said, “Fire away.”

Ned already had his phone out and was snapping photos.

They continued down the row, turning at the room’s corner to continue down that wall as well. Nothing on display was particularly exciting to Peter, who’d seen some portion of these accessories, costumes, armor, and weapons while living at the compound, some part while out being Spidey and trying to help out, and some of them while being Tony’s kind-of intern. Though,

as an intern it was mostly armor and weapons he helped with, not so much with the purely aesthetic parts of the costume, but what he did handle as an intern, he, well, *handled*. Some of the things in this room he, if he hadn't built them himself, had at least had a hand in building or designing.

To put it simply, he'd seen all this stuff before.

But Ned, man, Ned was having a *blast*. He was taking pictures of *everything*, cooing over an old Widow's bite, staring raptly at a broken comm, asking unending questions about a boot of an Iron Man suit whose plaque said it was damaged a few years back and was thus unusable, but which Peter recognized as a mock-up for Mark XXXVIII that never even had any tech put into it. The repulsor in the boot was merely colored glass. There were no wires or joints or anything. No mechanisms. It was essentially a very fancy, metal paper weight.

He did not tell Ned this. Sometimes it was nicer to let people dream.

MJ was watching Ned's obsession bloom with something that looked almost like scientific fascination. She also had an eye on the rest of the students because, Peter supposed, as Team captain she felt some amount of responsibility over them, especially since Mr. Harrington was too busy taking pictures of a display that just had a ripped pair of Hulk's pants to keep an eye on everyone else.

(Peter remembered the debacle of Hulk ripping his pants during a fight. Thankfully no cameras had been nearby, but the Hulk was so embarrassed by the incident that he'd lost all his rage and shrunk back down to Bruce mid-fight. Bruce, who was more used to ending up pantsless in public had come out of the whole situation fine. He'd gotten a spare pair of pants from a nice woman in a nearby brownstone, and had met everyone at the end of the fight without looking anything other than perfectly normal, except that he was wearing black and yellow zig-zag striped athletic leggings. He even kept the leggings, claiming they were the comfiest thing he owned. The Hulk, however, the next several times he came out to fight, wouldn't look anyone in the eye).

"Jeez Joel," Tao's voice filtered back to Peter, over the din of joking and laughing teenagers, "can you at least pretend you're working?"

Peter looked over his shoulder to find Tao and Joel both standing by the exit of the room. Joel looked unconcerned, but Tao was practically looming over the man, holding his camera to the side protectively.

"I am working," Joel said, dismissively. "So why don't you step off!"

Tao scoffed, but backed away. "The least you could do was *pretend* to take notes. Or *something*."

Peter watched Tao and Joel for a few seconds more. If they didn't actually do what they were hired to do, well, Tony would be pissed. And worse, Pepper would be pissed. They wanted that article written well, and at the moment, it didn't look like there even *would* be an article coming out of this field trip. Which, Peter knew, was kind of the whole point of the tour. Good PR.

But hey, if no article came out, then Peter's face (along with his classmates') wouldn't be in the papers, and Peter wasn't really about to complain about less press with *him* as a subject.

Well, if Joel and Tao got it together, good for them, and for Tony and Pepper and the Avengers. And if they didn't, well, good for Peter. It was in fate's hands now.

"Look, Peter," Ned said, drawing Peter's attention back to his friends, and away from the journalist and photographer who really *weren't* his problem.

Ned was pointing at a display that had Thor's cape on a mannequin. It was singed and ripped, completely unwearable (as were all of the costumes that were on display here), but it was still very obviously Thor's cape.

"Cool," Peter said.

"Love capes," MJ agreed drily.

"Very safe," Peter added.

"Absolutely won't get sucked into a plane's turbines, killing you," MJ said.

"I don't think a plane's turbines are stronger than *Thor*," Ned said.

"Well," Peter said, "let's not test it."

"How would we test it?" Ned asked, confused, and then his confusion cleared. "Oh!" He said. "Because you—"

MJ's hand, now firmly over Ned's mouth, muffled the rest of what he was going to say.

"Exactly," Peter said, "but maybe don't be so loud about it?"

Ned eyeballed the rest of the room, and then made a muffled humming noise that sounded almost like "Sorry."

"It's fine," Peter said.

"Lies," MJ said, but obligingly removed her hand from Ned's face.

"What's next?" Peter asked, putting in actual effort to move the conversation along.

The three of them moved down the wall of displays.

"Ooh," Ned said, (his new favorite word), "is that a, like, Iron Man arm? It looks very articulate."

"Wrong colors," MJ said, and she was correct. This robotic arm was gunmetal grey and had a red star on the shoulder.

"Bucky's arm," Peter said. "The Winter Soldier's."

"Wow," Ned said, the word pulled out slowly and full of amazement. Wow was his other new favorite word.

Peter peered at it. "A replica, though a really good one."

"Oh," Ned said, less amazed this time. "Just a replica?"

Peter did a nice, kind, friendly thing, and caught himself before saying how many other things in the room were just replicas. It didn't hurt any one to let Ned think he actually *had* seen all these genuine Avengers things (that were probably too dangerous to let them be seen by just *anyone*), and Peter could make it up to Ned later by bringing him by the compound later, as a friend not as tourist, and let him actually meet Peter's roommates. The Avengers.

"The real one's probably too dangerous to just have out," MJ said, stepping up to the plate. Peter should mention to MJ more often how grateful he was to have her around. Of course, that might get

him punched in the shoulder (MJ wasn't great at public shows of affection), but it would be worth it to see her smile.

"Plus," Peter said, "the real one is like, *on* Bucky. Like, it's his prosthetic. He, like, uses it all day every day because it's, like, his *arm*."

"Oh," Ned said, getting it, "right!"

"Yeah," Peter said.

"Hey," Flash's voice from across the room caught Peter's attention as Ned led them to the next item (Redwing's prototype: an early version of a drone used by Sam/Falcon), and he tried to tune it out, but Flash's voice was so irritating that he had a hard time doing so. "Sophie, right?"

"Yes?" Sophie asked politely.

"I was wondering," Flash said, "if you know any, um, interns."

Peter's focus suddenly zeroed in on Flash completely.

So Flash was going to try to disprove Peter's internship after all.

"Interns?" Sophie asked. "Here? Well, until very recently I was an intern myself, though not here at the compound. I interned in HR at Stark Industries."

"Cool," Flash said, sounding mostly uninterested. "So you know the interns who work at SI?"

"Not all of them," Sophie said. "Why are you interested?"

"Oh, uh," Flash started, and he must have abruptly remembered that if he said Peter's name he'd be ousted as someone apparently *obsessed* with Peter, and that made him stutter.

Sophie, no doubt thinking she was coming to the rescue of an awkward teen, said, "Are you interested in applying? I highly recommend it. If you're interested in what it's like being an SI intern I can definitely give you some information. Here, let me..." and she was off, talking about her *own* internship with such vigor and excitement that Flash didn't really have an opportunity to interrupt to tell her she was wrong about his intentions. And what would he say anyway? He'd backed himself into a verbal corner.

Peter turned back to Ned's rambling with a soft smile that MJ caught and returned.

"Flash?" she asked.

Peter nodded, and they grinned together.

The last item they came to, next to the quiver that they'd started at, was a long, evil looking knife with a serrated edge and a black handle. It was in a glass case, like all the other items, but it had no plaque next to it.

"Probably Nat's," Peter murmured, and then corrected himself. "I mean, Black Widow's."

"Do you recognize it?" Ned said.

"No," Peter said. "She just, she likes knives."

"Alright," Sophie said, when most of the class was milling in the center of the room. "Has

everyone seen everything they wanted to?" There was a general noise of assent, and Sophie nodded like someone had instead articulated that yes *indeed*, everyone was finished looking at the displays. "Alright, let's move on then."

She headed out the door, the whole group following her, with Mr. Harrington keeping to the back of the group. Peter supposed it was to make sure everyone was accounted for.

Joel stuck to the back as well, though this time Tao chose to stay near the front, taking pictures as they walked (at least one of them was doing their job correctly), as were Peter, Ned, and MJ, since Flash had elected, this time, to stay as far away from Sophie (who'd talked to him for twenty minutes about her own internship history [Peter was going to buy her a fucking fruit basket]) as he possibly could.

"Up next," Sophie said as they walked, "we're going to be touring the Avengers gyms. That's right, plural. To do what they do, they have to keep active, and exercise is a very important aspect of that for most of them, so they have different gyms, all of them designed with different training regimens in mind. Later this afternoon we'll get to see other parts of the compound as well. I know you're from a science and technology school, so I'm sure you'll all be excited to learn that later today we'll be touring not only Tony Stark's lab, but Bruce Banner's as well."

"Oh my god," Ned whispered, "that's going to be so *lit*."

Sophie stopped moving, and it took Peter a second to realize it was because they'd gotten to the elevator, which opened to them a second later, without Sophie having to push any buttons. "The Gyms," she said, as they followed her into the elevator, "or the training rooms, as they are sometimes called, are all on the second floor of the building. I was informed, when I first started, that some of them used to be in the basement, but that the lack of daylight in those rooms made some Avengers feel uncomfortable." Namely, Peter knew, Bucky, who loved to exercise, but who started to feel claustrophobic and trapped after more than an hour in a room without natural light, and easily accessible exits. Like Windows.

The elevator began to rise.

Just Human

Chapter Notes

Can I still count this fic as gen if two characters GASP! hold hands?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They stood outside the entrance to one of the training rooms (the one, Peter was pretty sure, that had gymnast mats on the floor, acrobat equipment, and yoga mats rolled up in a corner for easy storage. Bruce's and Clint's favorite gym, though for different reasons) for a moment before entering. Sophie stepped in first to make sure everything was tidy (Peter was pretty sure she meant that no weapons had been left out), but she came back out with a too-wide smile on her face that made Peter nervous.

"Alright you guys! Are you ready for the gyms?" She waggled her eyebrows at them (which made Peter more nervous) and then turned and opened the door for them. Ushering them in took no time at all in reality, but seemed to Peter to take forever, since standing halfway across the room was none other than Sam Wilson, dressed in loose athletic clothes (by which Peter meant the clothes Sam always exercised in: a loose grey shirt and basketball shorts).

Peter dropped to the back of the group, dipped behind Ned and MJ, and pulled his hood up and over his head, hoping that the neon green would be a good enough distraction that Sam wouldn't look at his face.

There weren't any exclamations of surprise or shock from his classmates yet, so it seemed like no one else had noticed yet that they were breathing the same air as the Falcon. In all probability they'd noticed that *someone* was in the room, but they weren't close enough yet for anyone to identify him.

"Surprise!" Sophie said, speed walking around the idling group of teenagers, and then gesturing for them to follow her as she continued forward into the room at a speed not much below a speed walk. "I had no idea there'd be an *actual Avenger* here, but I'm glad. This will be such a treat!"

Peter let himself drop farther back, past Mr. Harrington, till he was beside Tao.

"Excited?" Tao asked, kindly.

Peter nodded, and then very quietly (Sam, thankfully, didn't have Steve's hearing) said, "You?"

Tao laughed. "Yeah. I've done pieces on heroes before, but this is different."

"Are you nervous?" Peter asked.

Tao smiled at Peter, amused. "Shouldn't I be asking you that question? You must be over the moon to be meeting an Avenger."

Peter couldn't tell if Tao was being patronizing or if the man actually cared to know, or was actually thinking about Peter's opinions. He examined Tao's face. It didn't *seem* to have any artifice in it. The man seemed genuine enough.

“It’s always a mixed bag, meeting your heroes,” Peter said. “It’s always a possibility that they won’t live up to expectations.”

Tao blinked at him. “You think they’re going to let you down?” He didn’t say it like he thought Peter was stupid, or like he agreed with Peter. No. He said it like he genuinely wanted to know.

Peter didn’t think *any* of the Avengers would *ever* let him down. “No,” he said slowly. “I just, I think people forget they’re human. They’re just people too. They aren’t gods.” He laughed. “Well, except Thor.”

Tao made a considering noise in the back of his throat, but Peter didn’t know if he *would* have said something in response, because that was when the group arrived at where Sam was standing, in front of several rows of tumbling mats, and Ned, wonderful, amazing Ned, said, “Oh my god! You’re the *Falcon*!” very loudly.

Peter rolled his eyes *very* hard, and then tried not to look suspicious for not looking at Sam. At all. He lowered his eyes to the ground and kept them there.

“Oh my god!” Abe said in agreement.

Sam laughed jovially. “Hey guys! I knew a huge meet-and-greet wasn’t on the schedule for today so I thought to myself, why not go ‘round and say hi myself? Maybe answer some questions. Would you like that?”

The general, and loud, consensus was: *Yes*, and *Oh My God*!

Peter let himself look up very slowly, and realized if he shifted just a little, he’d be directly behind Ned and, as long as he stayed a little hunched, wouldn’t get spotted at all. And he could keep his head raised and not get a crick in his neck.

“As your friend in the back stated,” here Ned very bashfully put a hand over his mouth, “I’m the Falcon. My name is Sam Wilson. It’s good to have you all here and congrats on winning the contest. It was a good essay.”

Here Peter also bashfully put a hand over his mouth.

“Does that mean you read it?” Cindy asked.

“We all read it,” Sam said, wide grin on his face, hands on his hips. “We’re the one who chose the winners, after all. We wouldn’t leave that to just anyone.”

“Wow!” Charles said. “That’s—”

“Very, very cool,” Tyler finished.

“I knew the Avengers would do it themselves,” Flash bragged, and Peter rolled his eyes.

MJ made an aborted movement, as if to turn around, and then stopped herself. She’d almost looked at Peter, Peter realized, and she’d stopped herself, trying not to give him away.

He reached a hand out, very slowly and took hold of MJ’s. She jerked away at first, but then looked down, at her own hand, and quickly looked back up again. Her hand closed around Peter’s.

“So,” Sam said. “I thought maybe I could show you around the gym, maybe show you a few moves,” he winked them and a few people laughed, “and then *maybe*, if we have enough time,”

here he nodded to Sophie, “I can answer a few questions. How does that sound?”

“Amazing!” Yasmin interjected ecstatically, and Sam laughed.

“Alright then,” he clapped, “let’s start with a tour. C’mon,” he gestured for them to follow as he turned towards some of the acrobatic equipment, “let me show you around.”

And he proceeded to do so, in detail. Far more detail than Peter had gotten when he’d first moved in and had gotten a tour of the complex. Not that Peter was complaining that his first tour had been lacking. He wasn’t really interested in how many pommel horses were in the building, or how many mats it took to cover the floor in the entire room. He had no trouble keeping his head down and his feet slowed to the point where he perpetually stayed toward the back of the crowd.

Tao had abandoned Peter to go do his job and take photos of the tour (Peter didn’t blame him), but that left Peter at the back of the group, behind Mr. Harrington, by himself. Ned couldn’t help but move closer to Sam, he was so excited. He was practically vibrating in place at just being in the same *room* as an Avenger (again, how many times had Ned met Tony by now?). And MJ followed, doing an excellent job of not looking at Peter at all. It was what he wanted, he had to tell himself. It was good MJ was doing this, not looking at him, or for him, at all. It was for his benefit.

But he couldn’t help that he felt a little lonesome, all by himself at the back of the group.

Twenty minutes later, when they’d gone through every piece of the room that might hold even the tiniest most infinitesimal interest to anyone, and Peter thought it was finally over, Sam said, “And now on to the *next* gym,” and he walked out the door, down the hall, and into the next gym. “This one mainly has machines,” Sam said as he started in on this room as well. “We’ve got ellipticals, treadmills, bikes, anything you could think of really.” He laughed. “Hell, if you even mention to Stark that you were thinking about going to the Anytime Fitness to try their stairmaster, just to *try it*, the next thing you know we own three.” He gestured to the three stairmasters.

“Does Tony Stark do that a lot?” Yasmin asked.

“What? Buy people things because they mention them *once*? Yes. Constantly. All the time.”

Peter could verify that. He had a whole second closet full of not-yet-attempted Star Wars Lego sets for that very reason. A whole *closet* full of them.

“Why?” Tyler asked. “Is he trying to, like, buy your friendship or whatever?”

“I wish I had a friend like that,” Flash said and laughed, and Peter had never wanted to hit Flash for anything he’d *ever* done before, as much as Peter wanted to do so in that moment.

“No,” Sam said, somewhat sternly. “Tony doesn’t think like that. He’s...” he sighed, “Tony is a very giving person. Selfless.”

Someone laughed.

“Yeah,” Sam said, “I get where you’re coming from. I’ve seen *all* the same tabloids and press releases as you guys have. But he’s not...” Sam pressed his lips together, as if trying to come up with a good way to explain it.

And Peter understood. Tony came off as uncaring half the time. He spoke so fast, overruled what you were trying to say, sometimes it seemed like he wasn’t listening at all. But he was. Tony listened to everything. It seemed like Tony didn’t care at all, but the reality was, of course, that he cared too much.

“He just wants people to be happy, and he thinks that if he can use money to do that for them, why not?” Peter said quietly, almost to himself, without thinking, and then balked.

Hadn’t he been trying to keep a low profile?! Geez was he bad at this. He’d spoken quietly, but not *that* quietly.

“What was that?” Sam asked, “Could you speak up?”

Peter grimaced. He didn’t really want to say it again, didn’t want to draw attention to himself (like, at all), but staying silent when Sam had *asked directly* to hear what he’d said, well, that was suspicious as hell, wasn’t it?

“He wants people to be happy,” MJ said, and oh my god, Peter could just kiss her. Peter wanted to pick her up and swing her around for doing *this*, for doing this for him. For covering for him, covering up his mistakes. “And he thinks that if his money can make people happy...”

She shrugged.

“Then why not?” Ned asked, picking up the thread, and making Peter want to kiss him as well. How in the world did Peter deserve such friends as these? “He’s generous,” Ned summarized.

Sam’s expression evened out. “Exactly! He’s a good guy, just tries too hard sometimes. But he’s only ever got the best intentions.”

Peter could not have said it better himself.

“And it’s true, Tony’s fitted out all of these gyms, the whole compound even, based on what he thought we’d like.”

“Like the stairmaster,” Sue said.

“Exactly,” Sam said, and then used that to jump back into the very detailed tour of the room. They ended going into two more training rooms, and Sam had one more room he was aiming for, but in the doorway he stopped.

“Oh,” he said, and took a step back, letting the door slide closed. “Sorry, there are people in there.”

“More Avengers?” Flash demanded.

“Yeah,” Sam said, “the Black Widow and Hawkeye are sparring.”

“Oh my god,” Yasmin says, “can we meet them *too*?”

“Yes!” Cindy says. “Yes please!”

Peter’s heart did a little sidestep, skipped a beat, and then tried to jump out of his throat.

Absolutely not. They could *not* go into that room. He could fool Sam by being small and not very outstanding, but he couldn’t fool Natasha from eighty miles away if she had a blindfold on and noise cancelling headphones. Nat would *not* be fooled. She was unfoolable.

And frankly, neither would Clint. He wasn’t as good as Natasha, but he was still pretty damn good at sniffing out whatever anyone was trying to keep hidden. It made buying Christmas gifts for the guy *pretty difficult*.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Sam said regretfully, to the disappointment of every teenager in the hall

except Peter, who's heart decided to give living in his ribcage another shot.

"They can get a little intense," Sam explained, "and as much as the Black Widow would, I'm sure, *love* to show you what she can do, it wouldn't be fair to them to just butt in during their workout."

"Aww man," Yasmin said.

Sam ignored that. "Let's go back to the first room then, shall we?" And he led them back down the hall and into the room they'd started in.

"Anything else?" Sophie asked.

"I could do a little demonstration," Sam offered.

Ned said, "Oohh! Yes!" loud enough for Sam to laugh, but Ned wasn't the only one that seemed excited to see what a real Avenger could do.

"Alright then, folks," Sam said. "One demonstration coming up." He started backing away from the group, giving himself enough space to do his demonstration without winging anyone. "Now," he said, "I don't want to get anyone's hopes up. I'm no Captain America. Without the wings I'm just a normal man, albeit one who served in the military. What I can show you won't be *superhuman* in any way."

"Just human," Peter muttered beneath his breath.

"Just human," Sam finished the punchline with a laugh. Sam had used that line too many times in the living room before destroying Steve or Thor in some video game or another. He was predictable like that.

It was kind of nice.

"Interesting," said a voice way closer than Peter was expecting, and Peter snapped his head around to see Joel, who was *skulking* around the back of the group. He finally had a little notepad out, and a pen, and was ostensibly taking notes, but with Peter's keen sight he could see that Joel hadn't written anything at all on the notepad. Joel met Peter's eyes, smirked, and then kept walking.

There was something wrong with that guy. He was weird.

But, Peter thought with a shake of his head, that wasn't really his problem. A weird journalist was bound to write a sub-par piece, which would no doubt upset Pepper and Tony, and well, everyone, probably. But there wasn't anything *Peter* could do about it.

Turning back to Sam, Peter realized he must have missed Sam starting his demonstration, because Sam was already into it. Showing off various basic moves (how to correctly punch someone without breaking your thumb or overextending, how to properly high kick, etcetera), and talking them all through each one. Peter shuffled a little to stay behind Ned as Sam demonstrated moves, but besides that didn't pay much attention. He knew how to fight, and while he wasn't, maybe, the best at advanced moves (he tried to copy Black Widow sometimes, but even with practice he knew he was getting it wrong fifty percent of the time), he knew how to properly throw a punch.

What brought him back to the present was Sam saying, "Alright, well that's the last one. Enough of me going solo, why don't you all spread out and we can practice some of the moves I just showed you!"

Peter's heart jumped in his chest and he had to bite down on his tongue to stop from making a

noise. If they spread out to practice... punching, or whatever, Sam would definitely recognize him. He'd walk around correcting forms and giving advice, and he'd *recognize Peter*.

A cheer rose from the students in front of Peter while Peter, in the back of the group, dropped his chin to his chest and desperately wished the gym mats would open up and swallow him whole.

"Oh," Sophie said, once again saving the day (seriously, Peter was going to have to get her something to thank her. Maybe *two* fruit baskets), "I'm sorry kids, hate to burst your bubble, but I don't think we have enough time for that."

"Oh man," Charles groaned.

"A fighting lesson? With the Falcon?" Yasmin asked. "I can't believe we're missing out."

"I want to learn how to punch," Ned murmured.

"You wanna learn how to punch?" MJ asked Ned. "I can teach you how to punch." She punched his shoulder lightly.

"I know you're joking, MJ," Ned said, "but I'm holding you to that." He said it with such seriousness that it made Peter laugh.

"I'm telling my father," Flash muttered, but not loud enough for anyone to hear but himself. And Peter.

"Sorry, guys," Sam said. "I should have checked on the time before I got your hopes up."

"That's ok, Mr. Wilson," Cindy said, "we understand."

"Well, if we can't do a sparring workshop," Sam said, and turned to Sophie. "Do we have time for questions, Sophie?" Sam asked.

Sophie checked her wristwatch. "A few maybe. Informally?" She shrugged, and then maybe realized that *she* was the tour guide and didn't need to defer to Sam just because he was a superhero (being a superhero just made him good at saving the day, rescuing people, beating bad guys, not necessarily time management). "How about if you have questions for Sam here you can stay back, and when you're done we can meet out in the hall, hm? And then we can move onto the next part of the tour."

That sounded good to Peter.

"Yeah," several other students crowed as well.

"Alright," Sophie said with a laugh. "Have at it! Meet you guys in the hall when you're done. And, um, Mr. Wilson?"

Sam laughed, but didn't correct her. "Yes?"

"If you wouldn't mind sending the stragglers out in ten minutes?"

Sam saluted and then laughed again. He was a gregarious guy like that.

Sophie turned and made for the door leading to the hall. Peter gave it a half a second and then turned as well, quick on her heels. It wasn't until Peter was out in the hall, watching Sophie lean against the wall and pull out her phone that he realized that he was the only one who'd followed.

He stepped back just a half a step, only enough to look back through the doorway at all of his classmates crowded around a slightly flustered, slightly amused-looking Sam Wilson. Tao was standing slightly apart from the crowd, taking photographs, and Joel was standing even further apart, not even looking at Peter's classmates or Sam, but instead seeming to scope out the room.

Joel was a weird guy.

"Oh," Sophie said, pulling Peter's attention away from Joel and the hero-worship happening in the gym, "did you not have any questions for the Falcon?"

Peter opened his mouth and found that he didn't have anything to say, no excuses ready and available on the tip of his tongue. Instead he shrugged helplessly.

"Oh," Sophie said, this time with unearned sympathy in her voice, "are you shy?"

Boy, Peter realized, no matter what he said now, it would all be super awkward later when she met him for real. Next time they met he'd be introduced as Tony Stark's temporary ward, and Sophie would recognize him, and remember this conversation, and Peter didn't know what he'd do *then*, but he especially didn't know what to say now to make the future less awkward.

(Maybe if he got her a really fancy edible arrangement she'd agree not to freak out and make everything awkward when they next met.)

"Uh," Peter said, very intelligently.

"You don't have to answer that," Sophie said with an awkward laugh.

But the alternative to Peter talking seemed to be an even more awkward silence. Peter met Sophie's eyes, and then looked at his feet, and then looked up to see Sophie looking at *her* feet, and then, seeing her eyes rising, looked back down at his feet.

See? Super awkward.

"Do, ah, you," Peter started, just to fill the silence with *something*, "like, um, working here?"

"Yes," Sophie said with a sigh of relief. "It's kind of a dream come true."

"Yeah?" Peter asked.

Sophie nodded.

Peter pursed his lips.

The silence between them stretched.

"What, ah, what do you think of the, um, Avengers?" Peter asked, desperate to stay out of the awkward silence, but knowing that the question he'd just asked must have been the most clichéd thing to say.

"Oh," Sophie said, "they're great."

"Have you met them all?" Peter asked, genuinely curious.

"Not even most of them," Sophie admitted with a laugh, and her shoulders relaxed a little.

"Which ones have you met?" Peter asked.

“Why are you so curious?” Sophie asked, smiling. “You know, if you have questions about the Avengers, it would have made more sense to stay in the gym and ask them of Mr. Wilson.”

“Sam?” Peter frowned. “I don’t want to hear what an Avenger thinks of the other Avengers. I don’t actually want to hear about the other Avengers.” He tilted his head to the side. “I’m more curious about what you think of them. You just started here, right?”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “Did I mention that?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Peter said, realizing suddenly that he had no idea if she’d mentioned that or not. “So,” he said hurriedly, “you must have, like, a fresh opinion on them, right? That’s just what I’m curious about.”

Sophie, thankfully, seemed to accept his assurance that she’d mentioned her new-hire status at some point during the tour. “Well, in that case,” Sophie said, “I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you. I’ve only met a few Avengers: Tony Stark and Steve Rogers, and very, very quickly, Thor.” And, Peter added in his head, Natasha Romanoff. “And those meetings didn’t last very long.” She shrugged. “But they seemed nice enough.”

“What about your other coworkers?” Peter asked. Sure, he was mildly curious to see if she liked Donna and Jay as much as he did, but mostly he said it to waylay any more awkward silences.

But before she could even open her mouth Ned and MJ stumbled out of the door to the gym and into the hall.

“Dude,” Ned said breathlessly, eyes bright with joy. “That was so flippin cool! I mean, the actual *Falcon* answered my question!” Ned took Peter by the shoulders and shook him. “*Falcon!*”

Peter raised a hand to pat Ned on the forearm consolingly. “What did you ask?”

MJ stepped forward with pursed lips. “Ned asked if the Falcon would take a photo with him,” she said very drily.

Peter blinked at his friends. “Oh,” he said, thinking that must have been awkward. “Did he say yes?”

Instead of answering verbally Ned finally released Peter’s shoulders and fished his phone out of his pocket in order to show Peter his new lock screen. A picture of Sam and Ned, both posing like dorks. (Peter knew dork-poses. He was a master of posing dorkily. His whole web shooting thing made him look like he was throwing awkward upside-down, American Sign Language I-love-yous all over New York. He was the *king* of dork poses). Sam was smiling genuinely enough, but with the hand that wasn’t hovering a quarter of an inch above Ned’s shoulder he was giving the camera a very cheesy thumbs-up. Ned was, beautifully enough, doing his own version of Peter’s web-shooting pose. Amazing.

“Wow,” Peter said, “that’s very cool.”

Ned grinned at him, and over Ned’s shoulder, MJ looked at him like she knew he was being a less-than-honest asshole and humoring Ned, but was graciously allowing him to get away with it.

More students tumbled out of the door, and Sophie moved down the hall a little, letting the teens have room to line up. Eleven minutes after Peter had stepped out into the hall with Sophie, Mr. Harrington did the same, followed quickly by Tao.

“Is that everyone?” Sophie asked, and then started doing a headcount. She got to thirteen and

paused with a frown. “We’re missing someone.”

“All of mine are here,” Mr. Harrington said.

Tao sighed. “It’s Joel. He’s asking the Falcon something. I’ll go get him.”

Tao loped back through the door to the gym and Peter heard him say, not loud enough for anyone but someone with super sensitive hearing, “What the fuck, Joel. What is *with* you today.”

“None of your business,” Joel snapped.

Tao sighed. “Fine. Fine. You wanna be a little asshole about it, that’s on you. But the tour guide is waiting, so let’s go.”

Once everyone was back in the hall, Sophie said, “Ok everyone, you know what I think it’s time for?”

“Fingers crossed it’s another meet-and-greet,” Sue said somewhere behind Peter.

“The mad scientist laboratory?” Charles asked.

“A secret bowling alley?” Peter asked, beneath his breath.

Sophie met his eyes for a second, and he realized that he might not have been *quite* as quiet as he’d thought. “What did you say?” She asked.

“It’s going to be Tony Stark, isn’t it?” Flash asked loudly, and obnoxiously.

“Actually,” Sophie said, “It’s going to be lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Haha NaNoWriMo is super fake this year. Anyone else feel that? I’m super feeling that rn. Oh well, 1 day left I guesssss

HGTV Nightmares

“Lunch,” Sophie said as she led them up through the building, towards the Avengers’ more residential areas, “is catered. We ordered a wide array of foods, covering every dietary need from vegan and vegetarian to gluten-free to different religious dietary restrictions. But more excitedly, it’s going to be in the Avengers’ actual living room! Isn’t that neat?”

“Oh my god,” Sue cooed. Her HGTV dreams were coming true without even a kitchen tour.

“Are the Avengers going to be there?” Flash demanded.

“I’m afraid not,” Sophie said, “it’ll just be us for lunch. But we are going to be in *their* space so that’s something to be excited about as well.”

“Wow,” Charles said, “The Avengers’ actual living room? For real?”

Tony and Pepper had promised them that no one from the tour would be getting into any of their private or communal rooms, so it was more probable that Sophie was taking them to the Dying room. Peter winced at the idea of a group of teens eating lunch in the formal, fake living room that, last time Peter had seen it, had been decorated in pale grays and whites (with splashes of red for color). Teenagers weren’t any better at keeping their food on their plates and *not* on the couch cushions than the Avengers were. Peter didn’t want to imagine what the room would look like when lunch was over.

“Yes,” Sophie said with a laugh, “and here we are!” She put her hand out and Peter realized they’d arrived.

And he was correct.

They were standing outside the door to the Dying room.

“Head on in, everyone,” Sophie said, gesturing them forward, and the group of them moved into the room, slowly, as if entering some shrine which could have any number of things inside, all unknown. Very mysterious.

Inside was, of course, a generic living room filled with generic living room furniture.

“Ok, everyone,” Sophie said as she moved past the students, who were still kind of stepping molasses-like around the room. “We’ve got a buffet style lunch on a table against the wall, plates and utensils on the right, drinks on the left.”

The food was still steaming and smelled absolutely divine. Peter, who wasn’t stuck in a weird will-they won’t-they of hero worship over a *living* room, dove straight for the food and started loading up his plate as Sophie talked.

“Feel free to walk around the room, to explore if you want. There’s a long table and chairs set up in the corner, but feel free to sit on the couches and armchairs while you eat. There’s enough seating for everyone. The Avengers often have guests over so this room was designed with big get-togethers in mind.”

Peter took his plate, piled high with food, over to the armchair Rhodey had sat in during their about-the-field-trip meeting, and curled up in it, crossing his legs beneath him on the seat so he had a lap for his plate. He carefully placed his glass of lemonade on the end table next to him to avoid

spilling it.

It was real glass. If *he'd* been the one prepping for this meal, he would have chosen disposable cups, or at least plastic ones, but he guessed Tony could afford it if the mess of teenagers in his compound accidentally shattered a whole bunch of his cups for no other reason than they were teenagers and prone to accidents, and Sophie wasn't requiring them to eat at a table. The plates were at least plastic, though they weren't the disposable kind of plastic, and they had painted gold edges that made Peter sigh and try to feel exasperated with Tony's ridiculous infatuation with making everything look high-class for no reason other than that he could.

Instead he found himself feeling fond. Stupidly so, like Tony was some wayward child with weird tastes that Peter couldn't help but feel affection for.

Sophie looked over at him and quirked a smile. "Glad *somebody's* actually interested in the food." Peter blinked at her and looked around to find most of his classmates investigating the decorative elements of the room. The photos of generic landscapes on the walls, the metal do-dad centerpieces on the tables, the bases of the standing lamps, and titles of the books on the standing bookcase that was full of, Peter knew, an ever-changing array of just whatever books had been on the New York Times bestsellers list over the past thirty weeks. After thirty weeks Tony, or more likely Pepper, had someone donate them to libraries with low budgets.

Nothing personable. Nothing that would actually mean anything. Nothing any of Peter's teammates could find meaning in, at least.

"It's good food," Peter said, and popped a cherry tomato, dipped in ranch dressing, into his mouth.

Sophie grinned a little at that, and then wandered off.

"Hey!" Ned whispered from close enough for Peter to hear him, and then wandered even closer. "Is this, you know, *really* your living room?" He squinted at Peter, as if wary of Peter hiding the truth from him.

As-if.

Ned was maybe the one person Peter *couldn't* hide the truth from. He was, historically, very bad at it.

MJ leaned closer as well, though she had a plate now, so apparently she'd given up on eyeing the walls and had given into lunch, as Peter had. "No way is this their *actual* living room," she said, and took a bite out of some leafy chicken wrap that had one of those fancy toothpicks in it. "From the way you talk, any room of theirs wouldn't be so..." she looked around, "spartan." She then hopped up onto the arm of the chair Peter was sitting on and swung one leg up so it was perched on the arm of the couch next to them, blocking off that route for traffic.

"Awww," Ned said with a pout, "Peter, is that true?"

"Afraid so, buddy," Peter said, and lifted his hand from his plate long enough to give Ned a consoling pat on the shoulder. "This is actually the dying room."

Ned blinked at him, and even MJ put her plate on her lap to give herself full range of motion to make a hand gesture that meant, '*excuse me?!*'

"*Dying* room," Ned said, confusion making his tone a little louder than it had been.

"Sure," Peter said. "I mean *they* don't all call it that. But, like, you get it, right? 'Cause it's

supposed to be a,” he made quotation marks with his fingers, “‘*living* room,’ but it’s not the *real* one. So it *fails* at being a *living* room.”

“Oh!” Ned said, “I get it!”

“It’s lame,” MJ said. “Lame pun. You’re weak, Parker.”

“Anyway,” Peter continued. “That’s why it looks like it’s ripped from a furniture catalogue. They only use it for, like, photo shoots and interviews and *formal* stuff.”

“Oh!” Cindy said, and Peter realized that she’d been way closer than he was expecting. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“What makes a lot of sense?” Yasmin asked, skirting around MJ’s sprawled form with her plate in order to sit on the large couch.

“If this wasn’t the Avenger’s *real* living room,” Cindy said. “Like, if this was only where they did interviews in stuff.”

“It’d certainly explain why there are no TVs,” Flash snarked.

“Oh my god,” Charles said. “You’re right! How did we not *notice*? How can this be a real living room without there being a *single* TV?”

“Living rooms don’t need *TVs*,” Sue snapped, but she didn’t sound so sure of herself.

Peter was just counting his lucky blessings that Cindy had only heard the tail end of what Peter was saying, and *not* the part where the Avengers’ living room was also *his* living room.

“Uh, Miss Sophie?” Tyler asked, drawing the attention of the tour guide immediately. She’d also taken a moment to fill a plate, and now put it down on the coffee table before standing up straight and smiling at Tyler to signal he could continue. “Uh,” Tyler said, because he wasn’t the most verbose of people, “is this— are you sure, I mean, that this is *really* the Avengers *real*, *actual* living room?”

Sophie’s smile wavered. “It is *a* living room,” she said.

“Hah!” Flash goaded. “Knew it! No TVs.”

Peter wanted to tell Flash to shut up, but he was, as much as Peter hated to say it, correct. There was no way the Avengers would ever survive in a living room without at least *one* television set.

“Bummer,” Sally said, and plopped herself into the corner seat of the couch.

“Yeah,” Abe said with a disheartened sigh.

“Aw,” Sophie said, “perk up! This might not be their *main* living room— which is off-limits to everyone, including staff, ie. *me*, for privacy reasons— but they *do* use this living room quite often. It just isn’t the one with the cheeto stains and endless tangled cords.” She shrugged. “Or so I’m led to believe. As I said, I’m not authorized to access that part of the compound.” And then she winked, which made a few of the students laugh.

Tao had grabbed a plate as well, and was eating tiny puff pastries with his fingers, and Peter wouldn’t have given him any mind, except that the man kept eyeing Joel with something like exasperation mixed with dread. Peter followed Tao’s gaze and found Joel, instead of getting food

or taking notes, examining the crown molding along the walls of all things.

By this point Peter had to admit that he was kind of on Tao's side about this. Joel wasn't just being unprofessional. He was acting *weird*. Though, at the moment, harmless.

Yasmin's voice brought him back to himself. "Sophie," she said, "how much do you *really* know about the Avengers?"

Sophie shrugged.

"Probably more than the news outlets," she said, "just by virtue of my working for them. But, as I mentioned, I haven't actually been working here very long. I've only interacted with each of them a few times."

"So," Abe said, "you wouldn't be able to tell us what, like, Captain America is like in real life?"

Sophie grinned at him. "He's just as kind and righteous as you might expect. He's also a perfect gentleman."

Sue pretended to swoon, and Ned looked at Peter with wide eyes, as if for confirmation. Peter nodded. He was positive he'd talked to Ned about *all* of the Avengers by now, but Ned tended to forget that in the face of more outside information. Peter also wanted to add that Steve wasn't just nice and righteous, wasn't just a gentleman, he was also a horrible cheat at cards and cursed like a sailor, and pretended that he *didn't* curse like a sailor, and was just, yeah, a generally good guy, but better than that, he *cared*.

But they weren't alone. And, Peter really *had* told Ned all that stuff before.

So, yeah, just a nod.

"Oooh!" Tyler said, "What's Scarlet Witch like? She hasn't done, like, a lot of interviews, and I don't even know what her powers are? Is it magic? Like, *real* magic?"

Sophie laughed. "Scarlet Witch is... nice too. She's not very outgoing. I'd be tempted to call her shy, but I don't think that's it."

Wanda wasn't shy, she was just cautious.

"As for her powers," Sophie said, "I only know as much as has been stated in interviews. Sorry."

Tyler shrugged.

A shiver ran down the back of Peter's neck and he twitched a little before trying to put it out of his head.

Sally leaned forward and put her plate on the coffee table to free her hands. She talked with her hands a lot. "Ok! So can we *please* talk about Tony Stark?" She asked, gesticulating while she talked, as she leaned back into her corner of the couch, and then she frowned and didn't proceed right away. A hand dipped down next to her hip, and then she was pulling out something white and rectangular. "What's this?" She asked, muted, almost as if to herself.

The tingle returned, and Peter's heart stopped. Because, that was *his* seat. Not, *his*-his, but the seat he'd been sitting in when Pepper had called together the meeting in this room. And *those*, those were his note cards. The note cards he'd been studying, that he'd *thought* he'd put in his pockets when Pepper had started talking, and then later, the ones he couldn't find.

Duh!

Because either they'd fallen out of his pocket or he'd missed his pocket *completely* and had instead stupidly *shoved them between the cushion and the arm rest!*

And now Sally had found them.

God.

Fuck.

They were note cards the whole team had. His name was *literally* on his set. And Sally had just found them in the crack of a seat cushion at the Avengers' compound where they had no earthly reason to be. This could *not* end well.

The shiver, which was— which *had* to be his Spidey-danger sense, came back, stronger than ever, and Peter felt himself tense in his seat, curled partially around his half-eaten plate.

And then, quicker than he was expecting from an intern-turned-tour guide, Sophie leaned forward and plucked them from Sally's hands.

"Sorry about that," Sophie said genially, with a perfect PR smile, as she stuck the note cards in her back pocket without looking at them. "I did a sweep for any loose personal items before the tour started, but it looks like I missed something."

Sally blinked at her, and Peter's heart, somehow, restarted, and he released a breath. He also released the crushed edge of his plate. The plastic had crumpled under the strength of his grip, though had, thankfully, not cracked. He didn't want to have to explain why his plate was in multiple parts.

The tingle lessened, though not by much, but he put it to the back of his mind. Sometimes it took a minute or two for his spidey-sense to get the message.

"Personal things?" Sally asked.

"Does that mean," Cindy said with a gasp, "that that— *whatever it was*— belonged to an actual *Avenger?!?*"

"Oh my god!" Charles said.

Sophie smiled. "Yes," she said, "or possibly one of their guests." And then didn't elaborate any more.

"What *is* it?" Ned asked, and Peter nudged him, perhaps a little more harshly than he needed to. Ned whipped his head around, but Peter just shook his head vigorously, and then at Ned's continued confused expression, winced.

But the question was already out there, and Sophie had already opened her mouth to answer.

And then, blessedly, beautifully, she said, "I don't know."

"What do you *mean* you don't know?" Flash asked.

Sophie shrugged. "I didn't look." At the room's continued silence (suffused heavily with confusion), she said. "Ms. Potts and Mr. Stark are very serious about maintaining the privacy of all the residents of the compound. It's hard for them, the Avengers and other residents, to live in a

place that is also essentially a place of work, so we— the employees, I mean— are given very strict guidelines on how to... respond to a possible breach of that privacy. That's why I did a sweep, earlier, of anything that could possibly belong to a resident that was not meant to be available for the tour. I missed the," she patted her pocket, "whatever this is, but that doesn't mean the rules for it have changed."

"What are you going to do with it? Whatever it is," MJ asked. She eyed Peter, and he saw that she'd guessed, rightfully, that *whatever* it was, it was his. She was always more observant than Ned in that way.

"The same thing I would have done if I'd found it earlier," Sophie said, "at the earliest convenience I'll ask FRIDAY, the building's AI, where I can put it so the owner can retrieve it. There will be no handover, I'll never see who the owner is, and I won't look at *what* it is. Because here at the Avengers compound we all respect the privacy of everyone else."

Peter kicked his legs out from under him and set his feet on sturdy ground once more.

That. That had been a close one.

He did not like how close a one that had been.

And he felt *stupid* for noticing the note cards were missing earlier and then *not bothering to look for them*.

This could all have been avoided if he'd just paid attention and thought things through and not been a *moron*.

"Oh my god, Sally!" Cindy said, "You actually *touched* something that belonged to an Avenger!"

Sally looked at her hands, oddly, as if trying to decide if she should be feeling something about that.

"We *are* in the Avengers compound right now," MJ pointed out. "We just met the Falcon. I think we've all touched *a lot* of things the Avengers have touched before."

Sally pointed at MJ and nodded, agreeing with her point.

"You know what they looked like?" Yasmin asked. She was sitting next to Sally, and Peter suddenly found himself wanting to curl his feet up beneath himself again.

"What?" Ned asked, leaning forward because— *oh my god Ned!* Why was he like this?

"They looked like the note cards we were using to study for semi-finals," Yasmin said. "The ones Michelle made us make, like, a week ago?"

"Two weeks at least," Charles corrected.

"More like a *month*," Flash complained.

Which was such an assholish exaggeration. Fuck Flash. Smarmy asshole.

"I don't think it was *that* long ago," Mr. Harrington mused, aloud, as if that had been a real question and not a rhetorical assholish remark from Flash.

MJ turned to Peter with a raised eyebrow and a very unimpressed expression on her face. Ned also looked at him, though he was wide-eyed, having finally caught on.

“And where *are* your flash cards?” MJ asked him very quietly.

Peter’s eyes skipped over hers and landed on the coffee table, and then on Sophie. He scratched the back of his head and then subtly pointed at their tour guide before running a finger against his upper lip and sniffing a little.

He could be subtle.

“Peter!” Ned whined, as if asking why Peter was this stupid and Peter turned a wide-eyed glare on Ned because *he didn’t know*! Peter had no *idea* why he was so stupid. He didn’t *try* to be an idiot. He was usually pretty smart, really. But it wasn’t like Ned didn’t know him as a person. Ned and MJ *both* knew what kind of disaster he was.

MJ rolled her eyes and then, like a saving grace, like a hail Mary, or some other sports metaphor that Peter only peripherally understood, MJ said, sounding so bored, “Yeah, well, it’s not like any kind of note card looks different from any *other* kind of note card.”

“Index cards are index cards,” Ned said with a solemn nod, and Peter had to control the shock on his face because Ned actually managed to sound casual about it.

Thank fuck for Ned Leeds. And Motherfucking *hail* to the all powerful Michelle Jones.

Damn.

But damnit, why wouldn’t the feeling of gooseflesh go away? By now the spidey-sense tingles— all over a stupid set of flash cards— was starting to piss him off. The issue had been resolved (Thank Sophie, thank Ned, thank MJ) so why did he still feel like all the hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end?

“Hah!” Flash said. “I wonder what Avenger needs to *study*!”

Peter’s eye twitched at that, and without meaning to he asked, “Do you mean, which Avenger needs to study something? Or what subject do they need to study?”

Flash opened his mouth and said, very smarmily, “Well, P—”, and then caught himself. Peter remembered, belatedly, that Flash had been dared not to mention or talk to Peter for a month.

Instead of finishing his thought Flash just glared at Peter and then turned his head away.

“Play nice, boys,” Mr. Harrington warned lightly, too used to Flash’s antagonistic nature to get up in arms about it. He was leaning casually against the wall, focused on his sandwich and on his recently refilled thermos of coffee.

(Avengers compound coffee was good coffee. Peter was very intimately aware).

Abruptly, two things happened, Peter’s spidey-sense went off like bone-shaking rumble of a rocket taking off, and Tao’s voice said, very quietly, as if only to himself, “Where the fuck is Joel?”

Freaky FRIDAY

Chapter Notes

Me, writing the title of this chapter: "I'm hilarious"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter popped up off his seat, dropping his plate to the ground.

It clattered, spilling a few french fries and miscellaneous bits of fruit salad onto the ground. He looked at it for half a second, his muscles growing tense.

“Oh,” Sophie said, blinking at Peter, and then giving him a kind smile that clashed horribly with the way every muscle in his body was tensing for a fight, “don’t even worry about it. We’ll get someone in to clean that up right away.”

“Butter-fingers!” Flash said, a smirk curling his lips.

“Flash,” MJ snapped.

“What?” Flash asked, as Peter turned on his heel, very, *very* slowly, trying to suss out why his spidey-sense was going off like there was a Hydra agent in the room, “I didn’t say his *name*.”

Peter’s eyes locked on Tao. The man looked very nervous, and was making sweeps of the room with his gaze as well. And then Peter caught a look at a door behind the buffet. A door that *he* knew existed, but which had, until that moment, blended in with the wall perfectly. Completely unnoticed behind a table. It was still mostly closed, but not fully latched. As if someone had snuck through it. Someone horribly quiet.

How had Peter not noticed someone leaving the room?

And... and the only person missing was Joel.

Fucking shady-ass Joel!

Shady asshole Joel, who was now somewhere in the hidden walkways that lived behind the formal areas of the compound. Walkways that could easily lead him out of the building, to some of Tony’s more dangerous labs, to the *core of the building*. To places Peter wasn’t allowed to go without Tony, and *certainly* not by taking the back way that was only there for emergencies.

Peter inhaled too quickly, bringing some saliva with it, but when he felt a cough coming for him he merely cut off his airway to keep from coughing, from drawing more attention to himself.

His spidey-sense was like electricity running up and down his spine.

He dove a hand into his pocket, reaching for his phone, and barely noticed as MJ put a hand on his shoulder and Ned leaned in, asked a very quiet, “Peter! What is it?”

“Hey,” Tao said, loud enough to draw everyone’s attention to himself. “Has anyone seen Joel?”

Sophie started forward a little. “Joel?” She asked, first confusion, and then worry writ across her face. “Do you mean Joel just walked ou—”

She was cut off by an alarm suddenly going off outside the room, and then a second later, one echoing through the Dying room as well.

The secret wall-door snapped shut, and there was a thudding echo of first the locking mechanism of that door snapping into place, and then the room’s main door trying to lock as well, before clicking open again..

Sophie’s eyes, suddenly wide, went to the flashing light in the ceiling which had suddenly popped out. Sodium yellow painted the room in strobing light.

“What’s going on?” someone asked, loud, and nearing frightened (a boy’s voice, Peter’s brain registered, without telling him *whose* voice it was).

“FRIDAY,” Peter said, loudly, trying to get the AI’s attention while his hand fished his phone from his pocket.

FRIDAY didn’t answer, but Sophie, misunderstanding, said, “That’s a great idea, kid. FRIDAY, what’s going on?”

The pause between Sophie’s question and FRIDAY’s answer was long enough that Sophie started breathing just a tad too fast (*panicking!* Peter’s mind said. *She’s panicking! Panicking! This isn’t good. Panicking!*)

At the disco, a different part of his brain added, because even when something wholly *wrong* was happening, he couldn’t stop his brain from thinking up inappropriately timed jokes.

Finally, after a (much, *much*) too long pause, FRIDAY said, “I apologize. We are experiencing—” she stuttered, (*AIs don’t stutter!*) “—experiencing a minor issue. Please remain where you are and it— it will be— be resolved as soon as possible.”

“That’s not good,” Peter said.

“Sophie,” Mr. Harrington said, pushing himself off the wall and carefully putting his plate on a nearby side table, “What’s going on?”

“Why’s the building’s voice freaking out?” Tyler demanded, also freaking out.

“Everyone, calm down,” Sophie said, not sounding too calm herself, but at least she looked like she was *trying* to hold herself together.

“Oh my god,” Ned said, eyes wide. He looked at Peter as if Peter would have an answer but— but he *didn’t*.

He didn’t know what was going on. Part of him wanted to tear out of there. (He’d have to do it literally if the doors were still locked, but he was Spiderman, he could literally rip through the door) He wanted to hunt down Joel, because even though he didn’t know *what* was going on, he knew the shady journalist had something to do with it.

(Why hadn’t he done something earlier? He’d seen Joel acting weird. Why hadn’t he thought to— to *text* Tony. Or somebody! But no, he’d just thought the guy was weird, and now weird-guy-Joel was loose in the building wreaking havoc!)

But...

But, if he *did* leave, he'd also be leaving all of his classmates unprotected. Sophie was obviously not going to be able to handle the stress from this *and* ten confused, distraught teenagers for long. And what if Joel came back?

No. He couldn't just *leave* them.

Plus, and really, he'd make the sacrifice if it came between this and saving lives, but, still, if he tore through a wall, he'd kind of be outing himself as Spiderman. And he'd do it, he really would, but if he didn't *have* to— well, it was just better all around.

Peter unlocked his phone and sent out a quick text, his fingers flying over his phone's keyboard without any of his usual hesitation.

Tony, he typed, *what's going on? Why's FRI freaking out?*

He didn't get a response, and *that* made his blood freeze.

And then stupidly (Stupid, *stupid* Peter! Why was he *such a fucking moron*?!) he remembered that Tony didn't even know he was in the building. If Tony *was* dealing with the issue, he wouldn't bother reassuring Peter when Peter wasn't even at the compound!

Peter was going to slam his head through a fucking wall when this was all over with.

Why hadn't he just *told* someone he'd be here today? All his plans and worries about— what? He couldn't even remember *why* he hadn't wanted to tell them. It all seemed so foolish in light of the knowledge that something was going down in his house and *no one else in the building knew he was here!*

He wished May was here— no. He didn't wish May was *here*-here. He just wished he'd had someone to talk to about what to do right at this very moment and he goddamn missed his Aunt like a phantom limb. *She'd* know what to do.

But she wasn't here. She was in Norway taking aesthetic photos of cottages and mountains or something.

Fuck.

Tao cleared his throat, awkwardly, and said, "Eh, um, Joel is... Joel is missing."

Sophie turned her eyes on him and said, "And how long has he been missing?"

Tao winced and shrugged. "I just noticed it. He's been acting off all day but I thought he was just being a jagoff." His eyes widened, looking around the room of teens. "Sorry, I mean, uh—"

"Jagoff sounds about right," MJ said.

"Michelle!" Mr. Harrington snapped, but without much weight.

"Attention," FRIDAY's voice said, more robotic than normal, "an Intruder has been located in the — an intruder has been located—" she cut off abruptly.

"That's *really* not good," Sophie muttered.

"Fuck," Tao said, "what's going on? Joel's just a *journalist*. Do you think he's part of— of

whatever's going on?"

"Yes," Peter snapped.

His eyes went to the locked secret-wall-door, and then the room's main door which was standing ajar.

"Are we going to die?" Cindy asked.

"I can't do any more near-death experiences," Sue moaned. "Wasn't DC enough?"

Peter tapped first Ned and then MJ on the shoulder, motioned them to stay where they were, and then hurried to the main door.

"It's karma," Charles said, "I knew we'd gotten it too good, winning this contest *and* winning semi-finals."

"Charlie, shut up," Yasmin said. "Karma's not real."

"Then explain this!" Charles whined.

Peter put a hand on the door, and suddenly a hand was on his shoulder, pulling him away. He had to reel himself in *very* quickly to keep from tearing Mr. Harrington's arm off his shoulder.

"No," Mr. Harrington said firmly, "no separating from the group. We are *not* having another DC."

"Peter!" Sally said, "were you *really* trying to leave?"

"Do you have a death wish?" Tyler asked, bewildered.

"He wasn't going to leave," Ned said harshly. "Lay off."

Good ol' Ned.

"The door won't close," Peter said, shaking off Mr. Harrington's hand. He put a hand to the door, heard a click, and then another click, and when he removed his hand, the door swung in, just a little. "This room isn't secure."

"*What?*" Sophie asked, panic seeping into her tone for real now. "That's not supposed to happen. If the alarms are going off—" and they still were: yellow lights flashing and klaxons sounding, "all the doors lock automatically."

"Well this one didn't," Peter said, making his voice drop into Spiderman's controlled, 'Trust me, citizen' voice without thinking. He didn't normally face this level of unknown danger without the suit on, and it didn't occur to him that it might be strange that he was the only one in the room not visibly panicking.

"FRIDAY," Sophie called out, her voice loud and shaky. "Lock the room!"

"My apolo— logi— pologies— gies," FRIDAY stuttered out, her voice sounding more like a series of glitches than her usual sassy lilt. "It appears I've lost connection to my— lost connection — It appears I no longer have— no longer have visuals on— on my—" again her voice just cut off.

There was a back echo of her voice, and Peter realized that she'd been speaking to the entire building, as if she couldn't tell what speakers to use.

As if she couldn't see them.

Peter took in a deep breath.

FRIDAY couldn't tell where anything was.

"FRIDAY," he said, looking for confirmation, and speaking with thoughtless authority. "Can you not see us? Do you not know where we are?"

"Correct," FRIDAY said, brokenly. "I can still set zones to lockdown, but I am unaware— I am unaware if they are already locked down or— I am unable to determine what zones have gone into lockdown. Please remain where you— I am unable to determine the location of any— determine where— determine the location of any personnel in the— in the building. Please remain where you— I am unable to ascertain what safety measures are already— are already in effect. Please remain— I am unable to— I cannot determine what safety measures are appropriate— what safety measure I am needed to employ, I—"

She cut off again, and Peter swallowed, harshly.

Whatever was happening, whoever had broken in— whether it was Joel or not, whoever it was, they were fucking with FRIDAY.

"That," Sophie said, "is really, *really* not good."

"Why's Parker allowed to talk to the robot?" Flash whined.

"Flash!" MJ barked out. "Shut your hole!"

Flash stepped forward in indignation.

"Also," Ned said, almost casually, (if it hadn't been for the way his voice warbled, and how his eyes were so wide in his head it looked like he'd never blink again), "you lost the bet."

"Fuck the bet!" Flash said.

"Flash!" Mr. Harrington snapped, fear etched into his voice too.

"Seriously though," Sally said, "who cares about the bet. We're going to die!"

"We're not going to die," Mr. Harrington said.

"We just need to get somewhere secure, right?" Yasmin asked. "We just have to find a room that locks."

"Attention," FRIDAY announced, "please remain—"

"FRIDAY," Sophie said, after FRIDAY cut herself off. "Where can we go that's safe?"

"I apologize for the in— for— for the inconvenience," FRIDAY said. "I no longer have control over lock down functions."

"Can you still read them?" Peter asked. "Are you able to tell *where* is locked off?"

"Negative, Pe— Negatory, young pada— No," FRIDAY said. "Zones are locking— locking down — zones are locking down and unlocking without my— without my input or control. I cannot see — where are the safe spots? Where? Hello?"

That.

That was very not good.

Tony was going to lose his shit if Joel-or-whomever permanently fucked up FRIDAY. Peter didn't know much about FRIDAY's predecessor, except when sometimes Tony got solemn and mentioned his previous AI, JARVIS, but he *did* know that JARVIS had been lost, and Tony had never really gotten over it, and if he lost FRIDAY as well he might actually explode. He might kill Joel-or-not-Joel.

"Hello?" FRIDAY asked again, and then her voice clipped out and from the speakers came a slow, bass-heavy tune and a famous voice sang, "Hello, Hello, Hello. Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me. Is there anyone home?"

"What the fuck?" Charles asked.

"Was that...?" MJ started.

Peter nodded. "Yeah, uh, Pink Floyd I think." He didn't live with Tony Stark only to *not* recognize a Pink Floyd song when it was sung through the speakers in the ceiling of his house.

"Comfortably Numb," Mr. Harrington confirmed.

"Why is the ceiling robot singing to us?" Sue asked.

"It's broken," Tyler said.

"She," Peter corrected absently.

"Attention!" FRIDAY announced. "Please be cautious of any person— be cautious when approached by— the Avengers are currently battling a— battling a villain who can take identities. Trust no one— trust nobody you are not— trust no one you are not currently with. Trust no one. Trust."

"Shit," Tao said. "What does that mean?"

"Maybe," Sophie said, "maybe that was *never* Joel."

"Good," Tao said with a sigh.

"Good?" Yasmin screeched. "How is that *good*? We had some psycho face-snatching bad guy with us all day!"

"Not," Tao said, "no. Ok, no, that's not good. I just mean, Joel Mitchell's like, my friend, and I'm happy to know he's not really an evil," he stuttered a little, caught himself, "villain type guy."

"That doesn't exactly help us right now," Sally said.

"No," Tao admitted.

"What do we do?" Cindy asked. "We have to do something. If we're not *safe* here..." Cindy said.

"We have to move," MJ agreed.

Peter nodded.

“We can’t,” Sophie said, scared and apologetic. “How are we going to get anywhere if we don’t know where it is safe? And— and if the lockdown proceedings are only working erratically.”

“And occasionally unlocking for no reason,” Peter said.

“Exactly,” Sophie said.

Cindy deflated a little at that.

“But we have to do *something*,” Mr. Harrington said. “Peter’s right. It isn’t safe here.”

Sophie threw her hands up. “I don’t— *I can’t...*” she let out a harsh sigh. “I’m just an HR... person. Even if I wanted to take us somewhere, I don’t have manual overrides for any locks. When, when FRIDAY was mentioning zones. The building locks down into actual zones. Like, metal doors— they come down from the ceiling, sealing the building into sections. And normally if FRIDAY was ok she could lead us somewhere safe, lifting the doors as we passed from zone to zone, and closing them behind us. But she says she can’t control that. And I’m just a low-level employee! A new one. I don’t have manual override codes for the doors. And anyways, we don’t know where’s safe. We don’t know which way to go to *avoid* the Avengers fighting this Joel-guy —”

“Not Joel,” Tao said.

“I haven’t been *trained* for this,” Sophie said plaintively.

“Well,” Peter said, “if Not-Joel is messing with FRIDAY he must be near the building’s mainframe, or in one of Tony’s— uh, Tony Stark’s labs where he has access to FRIDAY’s code.”

“How would *you* know?” Flash scoffed.

“Common sense,” Peter said, because that was quicker than saying, “I live here, I help Tony write some for FRIDAY’s code sometimes, I know where in the building those codes can be accessed.”

Sophie put a hand to her mouth. “How did this even *happen*?” she asked, seemingly to herself, but FRIDAY answered anyway, like it had been a question for her.

“My apologies! An intruder introduced a virus— a— and I’m feeling just— I’m feeling a little *scrambled*.”

The way she said ‘scrambled’ was almost like— not almost. When she’d said ‘scrambled’ she’d said it in three distinct voices. It was... *off-putting*, to say the least.

Suddenly there was a loud noise, a rumble through the building, and Mr. Harrington, voice pitched up an octave said, “Is the fighting getting nearer?”

“Unknown,” FRIDAY said, suddenly in her usual lilt. “Boss has reestablished my verbal abilities. Unfortunately I believe I’m still running blind.”

“Oh thank god,” Peter said.

“That doesn’t exactly help us get us somewhere safe,” Sally said, waspishly, and he forgave her because she didn’t know how important FRIDAY was.

“Especially,” Charles added, “if the fighting *is* getting closer.

“We’re going to die,” Sue moaned.

“Drama queen,” MJ said, a little meanly, and when Peter turned surprised eyes to his friend, he realized that she looked *really* worried. So did Ned, who had his hands wrapped around himself, as if he needed the physical help to hold himself together.

Enough playing around, he told himself. He needed to get everyone to safety as soon as possible.

And really, where was the safest place in the building? Or, no, where did *Peter* feel the most safe when he was here, in the compound? Somewhere he could hide from nosy super-soldiers and nosier archers, and just be himself, knowing no one could intrude?

It was obvious, and it was also very frustrating, because suddenly he realized he was going to have to take his entire Academic Decathlon team, his teacher, a photographer, and an intern-turned-tour-guide to his bedroom.

Fuck.

He hoped he’d remembered to tidy up the day before. He honestly couldn’t remember if he had or not.

His eyes focused on the tour guide. “Sophie,” he said, “let me ask you a question.”

She straightened.

“Where,” he asked, “in the building, is it safest?”

“Well,” she said, “um, I think, the labs?”

“Why?” Peter asked.

“Lots of explosions,” she said, almost with a laugh, but the laugh was broken, “and of course because of, well, um, Dr. Banner. It’s better safe than sorry. Who knows what might happen, and *boom*, you have a Hulk on your hands. So all the labs are reinforced.”

“And,” Peter said, “other places Dr. Banner visits a lot?”

“Well,” she said, “uh, yeah, I guess so.”

“Why the q-and-a?” Cindy asked.

“Yeah,” Flash agreed. “Why’re we just letting Parker ask dumb questions? We need to do something!”

“I am,” Peter snapped. This leading-the-witness was taking too long. “The safest place in the compound is going to be the place the Avengers spend the most time in.”

“The lab?” Cindy guessed.

“The gym,” Tyler said. “We saw three Avengers there, like, an hour ago.”

“Their home,” Peter snapped. “Obviously. The rooms they actually live in. Living room— *actual* living room. Kitchen. Their bedrooms. Very safe. Very well reinforced.”

As if to provide contrast, another rumble echoed through the building, and the klaxons suddenly cut off, only to start up again, the lights flashing an unhealthy red instead.

“That’s *really* not good,” Sophie said.

And she was right. Yellow meant danger, meant fighting, meant infiltration. Red? Red meant explosives, meant projectiles, meant don't-trust-anyone, someone's hiding in the walls.

"Oh," Mr. Harrington said weakly.

"Ok," Peter said, "enough is enough." He turned on his heel and swung open the door to the hall.

"Excuse me?!" Sophie snapped.

"Parker," Mr Harrington barked.

Peter stepped out into the hall, looked down the long corridor in the direction that would lead to the door to the Avengers living room. There was a large metal door spanning wall to wall, floor to ceiling, blocking the way. He stepped towards it, quick on his feet, and barely had the presence of mind not to rip off Mr. Harrington's hand when it appeared on his shoulder.

Again.

What was it with this guy?

(Ok, that was a little rude. Mr. Harrington was just trying to be a good teacher, a good in-charge-of-Peter person, and he shouldn't fault him for that).

But this was his *house* goddamnit. There was a villain in his house, and he couldn't even rush off to fight the guy, and his classmates were in danger, *he* was in danger, *Ned and MJ were in danger*. And he wasn't about to do *nothing*. He'd rather suit up and go punch a man, but he wasn't going to leave his classmates, his *friends*, unprotected in the *Dying room*.

The Dying room, whose nickname now sounded so much less clever, and so much more ominous.

No. He *was* going to take his thrice-damned classmates to his *fucking* bedroom and keep them fucking safe. Saaaaafe.

In his *bedroom*.

Ugh.

"Peter," Mr. Harrington said, very seriously. "You *cannot* run off."

"Then come with me," Peter snapped. "In fact, everyone needs to come with me right now."

"What was that?" Sophie asked, poking her head through the door.

Peter grabbed Mr. Harrington by the wrist and started leading him towards the metal safety door, and when Mr. Harrington tried to break Peter's grip Peter simply didn't let him. He didn't put pressure on Mr. Harrington's arm, he didn't want to *hurt* him, but Peter was strong. His grip was like steel. Mr. Harrington had no choice but to follow.

"Peter!" Mr. Harrington yelled.

"C'mon everyone!" Peter yelled. "Hurry guys. We're leaving!"

"What?!" Sophie squawked.

Tentative footsteps signaled that some people were following him.

“Peter,” Mr. Harrington snapped. “Release me this instant.”

Peter stopped at the door, dropped Mr. Harrington’s wrist, and turned around. “MJ! Ned! Make sure everyone’s with us.”

“What are you doing, Peter?” Cindy asked, but she’d followed at least, so Peter shouldn’t complain.

“Aye-aye, captain!” Ned called.

“I can’t *hear you*,” Peter sang, very awkwardly, because his nerves weren’t really up for handling Spongebob references at the moment.

Ned apparently didn’t have that problem, because, louder, he shouted, “Aye-aye, captain!”

“What is even going on right now?” Tao asked, as he joined the slowly increasing group in front of the metal door.

“Peter,” Mr. Harrington warned, “you’re getting detention for this.”

“Fine,” Peter snapped. “If we survive to get detention I’ll gladly take the detention, but in the meanwhile, if you don’t *mind*, I’m just going to focus on keeping us all safe, is that ok with you?”

“Uh,” Mr. Harrington said, obviously not expecting such an instant clap back.

“We’re all accounted for, Captain,” MJ said drily, pushing Flash (the last *and* the least) forward and stepping to block any possible escape attempts from him.

“Watch it, Jones,” Flash snapped. “What are we even *doing*?” Flash asked. “Why’s Parker acting like he can suddenly get us through fucking, uh, iron or whatever? What are you going to do, Parker? Punch it?”

“Flash,” Mr. Harrington snapped.

“It’s steel,” Peter corrected, quietly, “not iron.”

“Hey, kid,” Sophie said softly to Peter. “Even if we could, somehow, manually override this door, there are going to be several more security doors like this, and then the door to the Avengers residential area which, even in emergencies, can only be opened by residents.”

“Let’s worry about that when we get to it,” Peter said.

“What does that mean?” Tao demanded. “From what I understand, we’re *not going to get to it*. Unless for some reason you’re *special*, and can get us through these doors without a manual override.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Peter said. “I’m not going to get through without a manual override.” He met the eyes of some of his classmates. “You guys know how I intern at SI?”

“Not this again,” Flash said. “Fuck, Parker. Can you not drop that even in an *emergency*? Like, we could *die*, and you’re not going to let it go.”

“He’s not lying,” MJ said, from the back of the pack.

“Even if you *do*, intern for SI,” Sophie said to Peter, “so did I? That’s not helping me any right at this minute.”

Right.

Right.

Peter forgot about that.

Well, guess he can't hide behind his internship just to hide the fact that he lives here.

"Sure," Peter said, and then deciding to just *not* explain, turned back to the door and knocked on it. Twice, in quick succession, and then once, and then once.

"Like knockings going to help!" Cindy said, voice coming out strangled.

But a panel slid away from the door and FRIDAY said, without the echo, coming only from the panel, "Please provide biometric identification."

"What?!" Sophie squawked again, this time echoed by Mr. Harrington and several of Peter's teammates.

Peter placed his index and middle fingers of his left hand on a pad in the panel, and then lowered his head for it to scan his eye.

"Manual override accepted," FRIDAY said, her voice, again, only coming from the panel. And then the panel closed and the security wall began to ascend.

"Ok," Peter said, turning back to the group. "Explanations later, or preferably never—"

"Fat chance," Yasmin said.

"Right," Peter said weakly, "anyway, let's go," and he gestured for the people right behind him to move forward.

The students did. Sophie and Mr. Harrington did not.

"Ned," Peter said, "can you keep them moving? MJ, take up the rear?"

"Yessir," MJ said drily, already starting to hussle everyone forward.

"Aye-aye," Ned agreed.

"Peter," Mr. Harrington said, "What?"

"You've been asking that a lot today," Peter told him. "For now, isn't it enough that I can get us somewhere safe?"

Mr. Harrington swallowed and then moved forward. They wouldn't be able to get through the next door without him so he just gestured them forward.

"Let's go, Please," Ned's voice could be heard saying. "Go, go, go."

Less kindly, MJ said, "Move it or lose it! Actually, there's no choice here. *Move* it."

"Shouldn't you go and open the next one?" Sophie asked, awkwardly. "Uh, whoever you are?"

Peter put a hand out. "Pepper speakers highly of you," he said, being purposefully obtuse to avoid having to actually answer the question of who he was, and thus the implied question of how he just

did that. She shook his hand weakly while Flash, and then MJ passed through the door.

“Don’t tell me to move it, Jones,” Flash snapped.

“I’ll do what I want,” MJ snapped back, “if it’ll keep your sorry ass from dying, or worse, getting the rest of us killed. Let’s *go!*”

Peter smiled, just a little, at MJ’s back, and then turned to Sophie and answered the first question she’d asked. “I’ll open the next door after I close this one. Don’t want anyone following us.” So he gestured her through, and then followed. He turned, knocked on the wall, twice again, and then one, and then once, and said, “Lock ‘er down, FRI.”

Where there had once been a door was no seamless ceiling.

“My pleasure,” FRIDAY said, and the steel door began to descend.

Peter didn’t wait to see it close all the way, instead he hurried forward, Sophie on his heels.

Upsettingly, the next door they came across was already half open. It kept descending, dropping two or three inches, hesitating, and then rising those same two or three inches. Some people had already snuck under and to the other side, but Ned, MJ, Flash, and Mr. Harrington had waited.

“Go,” Peter barked. “I’ll close it behind us.”

Nervously, Mr. Harrington dipped beneath the door. Flash gave Peter an odd look. It was confusion mixed with something sour, and a hint of what Peter decided couldn’t possibly be guilt. And then he followed Mr. Harrington.

“Where are we going?” Ned asked.

“Well,” Peter said, “you wanted a look at the Avengers *real* living room, right?”

Ned grinned at that. “Sick!” And then he ducked under the half-open, half-closed, very nerve-wracking door.

From beyond the door, he could once more hear Ned chanting, “Let’s go! Let’s go!”

“Peter,” MJ warned, “I hope you know what you’re doing,” and then she ducked beneath it too.

“Me too,” Peter said weakly.

“Who *are* you?” Sophie asked as she ducked under too.

Peter followed, and then quietly, as he knocked on the wall in the pattern Tony had taught him and the door started to descend fully to the door, he said, “Uh, this is awkward, but I live here?”

“What!” she said, her tone caught somewhere between a scream and a croak.

He hustled her forward.

The next door *was* closed, but Peter was sure it was the last one before the door to the living room. His classmates and teammates parted as he approached, and he stepped up to the door unhindered.

“I tried opening it,” Sally said awkwardly. She knocked on the door. Twice, and then twice again. “Didn’t do anything.”

“I have the special touch,” Peter said with a wink and a two-knock, one-knock, one-knock, hoping to lighten the mood.

Gratifyingly, he got a couple chuckles out of a few of the surrounding students.

Tao, close enough to hear, did not laugh, but he was looking at Peter like he didn’t know what he was seeing, and that was almost as gratifying.

Not like it was some special trick that he knew how to get around his own house.

The panel opened, he provided his two fingers and one eyeball, FRIDAY said, “Twice in one day, Peter?”

“Yes,” Peter said as the door rose. Ned started herding the students forward, and they all, each and every one of them, looked at him curiously as they passed. God, if they survived (and they would, damn it all) he was going to have to answer a lot of annoying questions, and deal with a lot of strange looks, moving forward.

“I believe I’m starting to fight the virus,” she told him, “with help from Boss. More Avengers amassed, leaving him free to work on me.”

“Good,” Peter said, relieved.

“What the fuck,” Flash muttered as he passed. “He’s friends with the robot!”

Mr. Harrington, right behind him, looked at Peter, shrugged, and said, “Sorry Peter, but for once I think I agree with Thompson.”

MJ was next, and Peter told her, as she passed, “Don’t let them get too far past the next door on the right, ok?”

MJ nodded.

Sophie ducked under as well, without any prompting, and Peter followed before knocking once more on the wall.

From the smooth expanse of ceiling the door once more descended.

“This is crazy,” Sophie muttered, but she went forward without prompting.

MJ, good ol’ MJ, reliable MJ, had gathered everyone at the door to the living room.

“Why are we waiting here?” Charles demanded, but his voice was filled with more fear than anger.

“Yeah,” Cindy said, gesturing further down the hall to the next security door. “Shouldn’t we keep going.”

“Sure,” Peter said, stepping up, “if you want to get to the helipad. But if you want actual *safety*, we’ll be going through here.” He knocked on the red door.

“That’s the door to the living room?” Mr. Harrington asked.

Peter nodded.

“You said you’d deal with this, uh, accessing the living room,” Sue said, “when we got here?”

“Yep,” Peter said.

“How are you going to do that?” Tao asked. He looked to Sophie. “The residential area’s supposed to be barred to any non-resident, right?”

“Uh, yes,” Sophie said awkwardly. She turned to Peter. “And you,” Sophie said awkwardly, “you, um, you really have access to the Avengers residential area?”

Peter looked at her and felt the last vestiges of hope at him getting out of this without anyone finding out that this was his *house*, shrivel and die.

It wasn’t, he found, such a horrible thing. Not when the alternative was to do nothing and let these people stay in danger.

“I do,” he said.

“Bull-shit,” Flash called, but for once he sounded unsure of himself.

“Wish I could tell you otherwise,” Peter said, and then put his hand on the handle for the door to the living room. The handle, as controlled by FRIDAY as the biometric scans of the security doors, read his fingerprints.

“Hello Peter,” FRIDAY said, almost sweetly. “Trying to access area 54?”

“Yes please,” Peter said. “And I’m bringing in,” he did a quick head count, “thirteen guests.”

“Very well,” Friday said jovially, and then the lock popped audibly, and Peter turned the knob.

The door swung open, revealing a mildly messy, very lived-in, living room.

“Wow!” Sue said.

“Double wow,” Yasmin agreed.

“Alright,” Mr. Harrington said. “Gawk later. Get in, now, please.”

“Right, to safety,” Tao said. “Safety, safety, safety,” He couldn’t help but look around the room as well though. Peter understood, a little, why he did so. Not many people got such a close look at the Avengers *actual* living areas.

Peter had lived here for more than half a year at this point. It had been a while since he’d looked at the living room objectively. Now it was just... it was just home. He tried to see what his classmates, his teacher, Tao, and Sophie would see. The couch cushions were dented from being sat in by super soldiers, gods, and regular humans with too much energy and way too much caffeine. Baskets on the coffee table meant for organizing remotes, magazines, and cords lay mostly empty with said remotes, magazines, and cords laying haphazardly over the coffee table, end tables, and tucked between couch cushions. Whoever had last used the armchair had left the recliner up, and Peter knew if Natasha saw it that way she’d yell about it. A bow was propped against a far wall next to a single, broken, arrow. There were equations written on the window in dry-erase marker. There was a rubber band ball on the coffee table, and a few screwdrivers. A wii remote was broken into several pieces on the carpet.

It probably looked a mess, but to Peter it kind of just looked like home.

Which sounded sappy, even just in Peter’s own head, but, hey, was true nonetheless.

“Hey Peter,” Ned said as Peter ushered in the last of the group and closed the door behind them. “Why’s this area 54? Shouldn’t, like, shouldn’t this be like area 1? Cuz it’s the most,” he shrugged, “important or something?”

“Or area 51?” Flash asked, “Because aliens?”

“Only one alien,” Peter said, “and he’s a god.” Turning back to Ned he said, “Actually it’s a pun.”

“How is it a pun?” Cindy asked, which revealed, again, that everyone was listening in.

Peter’s face flushed. “Uh, well, so, the roman numerals for 54 is L-I-V. Like, um the word live, as in, uh, living room.”

There was a moment of silence from the peanut gallery as they processed that. And then MJ said, “Wow, that’s so fucking lame.”

Peter quirked a smile, and a few people laughed.

“Yeah,” Peter said, and then shook his head. “Anyway, this isn’t the um, the safest place we can go, so...” he gestured vaguely towards the hall that led to his room. It led to other rooms as well, but most of them were guest rooms for when the compound had visitors. The permanent rooms were further into the compound, but like his, all of them had privacy features, and he wouldn’t be able to get them into any of the rooms without the person whose room it was.

Which left his own bedroom as the safest place to take them.

(Yipee)

“Not that this place isn’t safe,” Peter said awkwardly, “only that there are *safer* places.”

“Ok...” Sophie said slowly. And she gestured the same way he had.

“We don’t know where we’re going,” MJ interpreted, and Peter startled.

“Right,” Peter said.

The sound of the klaxons increased, and there was another rumble, and MJ said, “Lead *on*, Maestro.”

Peter shook himself with a laugh, and then made a beeline for the back hall that would lead to his room.

There was a slight hesitation, and then the class started to follow.

“Hey,” he said, half turning back to look at his teammates as he walked, “try not to touch anything? The Avengers— um, they’re kinda weird about people touching their stuff.”

“Right,” Mr. Harrington said, disbelievingly.

“This is the weirdest day ever,” Cindy murmured as they trooped through the living room, moving around furniture, and avoiding stepping on scarves and hats and gloves only by virtue of the fact that Peter kicked them out of their path as he went.

“Tell me about it,” Yasmin said. “Wait till twitter hears about this!”

“I can’t believe Parker...” Flash started and then made a noise in his throat that was *very* rude.

“How does he know how to...” he made another noise. “I mean, did he *bribe* the tour guide to give him the passcode and then have her *pretend* not to know it?”

That startled Peter enough that he looked behind him, to catch Flash’s eyes from where Flash stood, at the end of the line of people. Flash was talking to Charles, right in front of Mr. Harrington and MJ, but obviously quiet enough that neither of them had heard what he said.

Flash caught Peter’s eyes and glared, and then even more quietly, continued to Charles (not realizing, of course, that Peter could hear him), “I mean, what else could it be. Maybe, I’ll admit that *maybe* he could *possibly, feasibly*, be a low-low-low-level intern at Stark Industries. Like. The lowest. But to know how to get into the Avengers’ *personal* areas? Absolutely fucking not. That’s ridiculous. That’s insane.”

For once, Flash was right. It *was* kind of insane. That didn’t mean it wasn’t *true*. But for all that it always pissed Peter off that Flash couldn’t believe that Peter interned at SI (because that was an insult to his intelligence), it didn’t bother him at all that Flash couldn’t believe that Peter had access to the Avengers residential areas. He hadn’t *wanted* anyone to believe it, let alone be aware of the fact. It was going to be obvious pretty soon that Peter actually lived here, and he really, *really* hadn’t wanted anyone knowing that fact. So of course it didn’t bug him that Flash didn’t believe he’d really have access to the area.

It *did* kind of bug him that Flash thought he’d stoop to bribery, but Peter had stooped to worse in the past, and it would all come out to be true soon anyway.

As much as he absolutely dreaded, absolutely *loathed* the idea.

“Yeah,” Charles agreed. “It *is* kind of insane.”

Same, Charles. Same.

“Huh,” Sue said, “the um, the Avengers are kinda, well, you know...”

“Slobs?” Sally asked, and both girls laughed.

“It looks like my brother’s dorm room,” Abe said.

“It looks like *my* brother’s frat house,” Cindy said.

“It looks like *my* living room,” Ned said, and then laughed. “It just looks like someone’s house.”

“Yeah,” Sue said, “it does, doesn’t it? I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this.”

“Something spectacular,” Yasmin put in.

“Something dope,” Tyler added, “like a vending machine that vends money.”

“That’s stupid,” Sally said.

“*You’re* stupid,” Tyler shot back.

“No one’s stupid,” Mr. Harrington said, exhaustion in his voice.

“But it’s just... normal,” Sue said. “Like, it’s just some random living room.”

“Except for the arrows,” MJ pointed out. “My living room doesn’t have arrows.”

“Mine does,” Tao said, and Peter turned to look at him, noticing several other students do so as well. “Decorative!” Tao defended himself. “They hang on the wall. Very dull! Not sharp at all. Couldn’t harm a fly.”

Yeah, Peter needed to get everyone out of the common area and into his bedroom asap. Ironically, there was less danger of anyone getting hurt, hurting themselves, or even just seeing something they weren’t supposed to see in his room. His Spiderman suit was well hidden in a secret panel in the back of his closet, unable to be accessed by anyone except Peter and Tony, and what else were his classmates going to see? His homework? His star wars posters? Dirty socks? Oh no.

He didn’t actually want to show anyone these things, but there was no actual danger from Cindy and Flash seeing his dirty socks. If they stayed out here they might actually find something that could be classified or dangerous. Like a Widow bite, or any of Tony’s tablets, which he left haphazardly in any room of the compound without care.

And he *definitely* didn’t want anyone trying to get a closer look at Clint’s bow. That would *cause* an incident.

Clint was very particular about his bow, even though he did tend to leave it anywhere. He still didn’t want anyone *touching* it.

So Peter sped up a little, slipping through the doorway to the hall without a backwards glance.

“Where are we *going*?” Sally moaned.

“Somewhere safer,” Peter said.

“What could be safer than the Avenger’s living room?” Charles demanded.

Sophie gasped. “Are you trying to take us into one of the Avengers’ *personal rooms*?!”

“Peter,” Mr. Harrington said, his voice a strange mixture of panic and resignation. “Am I going to have to call your aunt?”

Peter winced. “Please don’t call my aunt.”

“Call the twerp’s aunt!” Flash demanded. “Or better yet, let him hack his way into Tony Stark’s bedroom, and when an Avenger catches him they’ll call the police and he’ll be arrested. Hear that Parker! You’re going to jail!”

“Flash,” MJ snapped, the tone of her voice showing that she’d officially lost *all* patience. “Shut your stupid mouth or the next time Peter tries to save your life I’ll stop him.”

“Hey!” Flash said, offended.

“Dude,” Ned said, “like, you kind of deserve it.”

“Shut it, Leeds,” Flash said.

Mr. Harrington sighed. “Eugene, am I going to have to call your parents too?”

“No,” Flash whined and then sighed. “Fine, I’ll let Parker somehow sneak us into the Black Widow’s apartment and I won’t even cheer when she kicks his ass.”

“Flash!” Mr. Harrington snapped. “Enough.”

Natasha's bedroom wasn't down this hall. Though Tony and Pepper's suite *was* further down this hall. The only other Avenger's room that was down this hall was Bruce's, and it was way further down the hall than Peter's as well. They'd already passed a few rooms. A couple were guest rooms, one was a library that Steve and Wanda spent the most time in, one was a mini theatre, with a popcorn maker and a movie-theater-esque leather recliners.

But Peter passed all of those, and then finally, after what seemed like forever (though it had probably, in reality, been less than a minute), he arrived at his door.

It looked like every other door in the hall, except that stuck on the door, about a foot over Peter's head, was a small yellow sticky note with words written in blue highlighter. It said, "NO."

Peter had put it there a few days previous when he'd wanted an uninterrupted chat with Aunt May. He had, of course, also asked FRIDAY not to permit any intruders, but he wasn't the kind of person not to give warning first. If Clint wanted to see the note and ignore it, well hey, that was on Clint.

He'd forgotten to take it down after Skyping with May, so now he reached up awkwardly and snatched it from his door before crumpling it in his hand and sticking it in his pocket.

He swiveled his head around to make sure everyone was accounted for (head count: thirteen), and then put his hand on the door.

"Wait," Sophie said, sounding almost as young as Peter. "Whose room is this? If it *is* Mr. Stark's, Ms. Potts's room..."

"It's not," Peter said. "Don't worry."

"What's this room then? Why'd we stop here?" Flash demanded. "What makes this one special?"

"Where are we?" Mr. Harrington asked.

"Will I get fired for seeing what's in there?" Sophie asked, worry leaking into her tone.

Her voice sounded almost as worried as when the alarms had started going off.

Poor Sophie.

"No," he said with determination, "you're not going to get fired for seeing anything here. You won't even get in trouble. I made this decision. If anyone's going to get in trouble, it's going to be me."

Peter wasn't going to get in trouble. Sure, if he'd brought his whole Academic Decathlon team home to the Avengers compound for a laugh, that'd be one thing. And even then Tony would probably just joke around and tell Aunt May behind his back, because they both knew that of the two of them *she* was the one who doled out punishments and taught harsh but meaningful lessons without breaking. Tony was always more likely to cut to a joke in the middle of what he was saying, and then steer the conversation to a different subject entirely and pretend the whole event had never occurred.

But this? Hiding his classmates away somewhere safe while a villain infiltrated the building? Peter wasn't going to get in trouble over *that*.

A little holiday gift from me to you :D

Protocols for your Protocols

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Seriously, Peter,” Cindy said, “Where are we?”

Peter took another look at his classmates, met the supportive gazes of MJ and Ned, and said, “Uh, home? Or, you know, more specifically, uh, my bedroom?”

“That definitely came out sounding confident,” MJ teased.

Peter rolled his eyes, put his hand on the door (no doorknobs here), and said, “FRIDAY, initiate ‘One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor’ protocol, the fellowship numbers fourteen.”

“God,” MJ muttered, fondly, beneath her breath. “You’re such a *nerd*.”

“That’s so cool!” Ned said, awed.

Peter’s face flushed. When he’d come up with the protocol name, to let FRIDAY know that after he entered the room no one (not even a well-meaning Tony or exuberant Thunder God) was allowed to intrude, he hadn’t expected he’d have to say it in front of ten of his classmates. Yes, he liked Lord of the Rings. So what.

Yes, he was a nerd. *So what?*

The door clicked open and he pushed it, swinging it to reveal access to his room, and then stepped aside. “Ok,” he said, “everyone in.”

Cindy was first in, and even her worry over this whole situation couldn’t dampen her obvious curiosity in what the room held. Charles and Yasmin and Sue followed.

“What the heck,” Tao said as he crossed the threshold.

Sally looked at Peter like he’d announced that they’d recently discovered unicorns were real, and had provided *proof*.

“Yes!” Ned whisper-shouted as he hurried in. “Dude! I’ve been *dying* to see your room. Did you hang up the Death Star yet?” He didn’t wait for an answer before scurrying in.

Peter hated to disappoint, but he actually *hadn’t* hung up the lego Death Star him and Ned had built yet. He kept meaning to, he just never remembered to do it while he was in the compound.

Abe and Tyler followed, and then Flash, who was scowling, but very pointedly didn’t say anything.

MJ looked gleeful. “What secrets do you have in *here*, Peter?” she asked.

“None,” Peter said.

Her mouth twitched.

“Please,” he told her. “I’ll reveal my secret love of soap operas, my seventeen fushigi balls, and my hidden cache of ska band CDs after this crisis when the entirety of our academic decathlon team

isn't in my bedroom. Will you *please* not sabotage me?"

"*Fine*," she said, like it was such a big imposition on her and she was doing him a favor by not trying to embarrass him in front of everybody.

Mr. Harrington stepped, awkwardly, almost sideways, through Peter's door. He looked at Peter. Peter raised an eyebrow. Mr. Harrington shrugged. "Sorry Peter," he said, "just, emergency or no, it goes against all my senses to enter a student's, um, bedroom. Assuming that you aren't lying, and this is your actual bedroom. I'm your teacher. You're my student. It's... weird. Feels wrong." He shrugged.

Sophie was the last one through, and she crept through the door as if ashamed, as if she was doing something wrong, and said, quietly, to herself, "I'm so getting fired for this."

Peter rolled his eyes, followed her through, and closed the door behind him.

"You're *not* getting fired for this."

And then he came face-to-face with a bedroom full of classmates.

His bedroom wasn't small by any stretch of the imagination (no room in a building designed by Tony Stark could ever be considered *small*), but with fourteen people filling up all the spaces, it did start to look, and feel, cramped.

"This is your *bedroom*?" Sue asked.

Yasmin's cheeks pinked and she turned her eyes away, towards a vintage *A New Hope* poster framed on the wall. She muttered to Sally something about never being in a boy's bedroom before, and then blushed harder.

Sally rolled her eyes. She looked at Peter. "It's cleaner than my brothers' room, I'll give you that."

"Thanks," Peter said, weakly. He looked for Ned, who he always looked to for support, only to find Ned slowly moving around the room, looking at all the posters he had up, the shelves full of a mix of books and gadgets, his little workbench that had at the moment only a tool set and a disassembled outdated comm unit, the joint-custody lego sets Peter had on display, the few that were on his desk, yet to go up, his bed, with the embarrassing comforter covered in little illustrated Avengers that Tony had given to him as a joke because he was *so funny*. And which Peter only kept and used and never wanted to give up because it was just the perfect softness, the perfect weight.

Instead he turned to MJ, who had an expression on her face that didn't look like laughter at all, and that's how he knew she was laughing at him on the *inside*.

"There's no way this is your bedroom," Flash said, though there was more resignation and belief in his tone than disbelief.

Peter looked around dramatically. "It *looks* like my bedroom. It has all my stuff in it."

"No, no, *no*!" Flash said, though it probably came out as more of a whine than he'd wanted. "I cannot believe this is Parker's *actual* bedroom." His eyes snapped to Peter's. "There's no way you live with the Avengers!"

Peter rolled his eyes. "What, do you want me to prove that this is *my bedroom*?"

“Yes!” Flash snapped back, and Peter blinked at him for a moment. He hadn’t actually expected Flash to say yes.

“Ok,” Peter said. He looked around the room, and his eye caught on a picture of Aunt May and him at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida when he was seven. He pointed to it. “There’s a picture of me and my aunt.”

“You could have put that there!” Flash exclaimed.

Peter gave him the strongest ‘are you stupid?’ look he’d ever had dared give Flash. “When? When could I possibly have time to do that?”

Abe was close to the picture and was examining it. “Peter, you were adorable as a kid.”

“Thanks,” Peter said, awkwardly.

“And you’re Aunt’s hot,” Abe continued.

Peter frowned at him. “I take back my thanks. My Aunt is very off limits.”

Abe grinned at him.

“Plus,” MJ said, stepping up to the desk and flicking through some of the notebooks Peter had stacked there, haphazardly, “here’s his notes for class.” She picked up a blue, spiral bound notebook, flipped through it, and then whistled. “Your English notes shouldn’t be this messy, Parker.”

Peter scowled at her, and could feel his face heating up. “I didn’t like Ethan Frome.”

MJ rolled her eyes.

“No one liked Ethan Frome,” Sally said.

“Like those are really Parker’s notebooks,” Flash said with a scoff.

MJ flipped the notebook in her hand to a random page and turned it to face the room. At the top of the page, above all of the scribbled notes and half-finished sentences in Peter’s near illegible scrawl, in the corner, was Peter’s name, the date he’d taken the notes, and the teacher’s name. Habit from years of filling out every paper he turned in the same way.

“Or,” MJ said sarcastically, “maybe it’s some *other* Peter Parker who lives here.” She closed the notebook and put it back on the desk, at the top of the pile.

Flash scowled and crossed his arms, and *bam*, just like that Flash believed him.

Apparently.

“Huh,” Tao said, eyes flicking between Peter and Flash. He then turned on his heel slowly, surveying the room, “I can’t believe the Avengers have a kid living with them and nobody knows.”

“Oh my god,” Charles said, “Peter, are you secretly, like, *related* to an Avenger?”

“No,” Peter denied firmly.

“So,” Sally said drily, “you’re not secretly Hawkeye’s son or something?”

The idea of that made Peter shudder. “No!”

“So, why do you live with the Avengers, then?” Tao asked. He was fiddling with the strap of his camera, which hung around his neck, as if dying to take pictures of his room, but he must have been warned not to take any photos of the residential area (or, more likely, he’d signed his life away to Pepper in reams of paperwork), because he didn’t actually go any further than playing with the camera’s strap.

“Uh,” Peter said, “so, ok, so, I intern with Stark Industries.”

Sophie sighed. “You keep saying that as if that explains *anything* about any of the things you’re able to do in the building. *I* used to intern at Stark Industries. Now I *work. Here*. The things you have access to I couldn’t even dream of.”

Peter winced. “No, well, I have access to the residential areas and, like, FRIDAY knows me because I live here.”

“Right,” Mr. Harrington said, nodding, as if he was trying to really listen to, and *retain*, everything Peter was saying, for recall later. Poor Mr. Harrington. He was *trying*.

“Ok, but why do you live here?” Tyler asked.

“I thought you lived with your Aunt?” Sue asked.

“I do,” Peter said, and then shook his head, “well, no—”

Yasmin gasped. “Is your Aunt dating an Avenger? Does she live here too? Oh my god, who’s she dating? Not Tony Stark, but, maybe Captain America? Or—” she gasped again, “—could your Aunt be dating Black Widow? Oh my god that’s so *cool*!”

“Hah!” Ned said, finally tearing his eyes away from Peter’s decor (he’d been closely examining another poster, this one tacked to the wall, leaving red dots in all four corners, from *Firefly*). “Can you imagine that? May dating Black Widow? That’s *terrifying*.” And then, at odds with what he’d just said, he laughed, loud and full of amusement.

Cindy rounded on him. “You knew about this?”

Ned’s eyes widened for just a moment and then he shrugged. Weakly he said, “I mean, *yeah*? He’s, like, my best friend.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Charles asked, he turned to Peter. “Or you! Like, this is *dope*! You live with the Avengers. If *I* lived with the Avengers I’d be telling *everyone*.”

“How *long* have you been living here?” Mr. Harrington asked, and Peter’s eyes widened. And then, with care, he casually tried to make his face look like that question *hadn’t* made his heart feel like it was trying to make a break for it through the only hatch available to it: Peter’s mouth.

“Why?” Abe asked. “You never answered Tyler’s question. If your Aunt or whoever isn’t dating an Avenger, why are you living with them?”

“Oh my god,” Yasmin said, “are *you* an Avenger?”

It wasn’t even a lie when he said, “No!”

“Pfft,” MJ said. “As if this nerd could pull off being a hero. Please. He can barely get his

homework done.”

Peter glared at her in a way that he hoped properly conveyed, “Hey! You don’t have to be so convincing about it!” and also, “Thanks. You’re a life saver.”

Hoping to get everyone's mind away (far, far away) from both is-Peter-a-hero and is-Peter’s-aunt-dating-an-Avenger, he said, “So, the reason I live here, is, ok—” he shook his head, “so I intern at Stark Industries.”

“This again?” Sophie asked, plaintively.

“There’s a reason,” Peter said.

“Just let him explain,” Ned said, and then without asking hopped up onto Peter’s bed.

“Shoes off on the bed,” Peter snapped at him.

Ned should know better. He’d been in Peter’s room before (not this room, but both of Peter’s bedrooms were still *his bedrooms*), and he knew the rules. No shoes on the furniture.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ned said, pulling off his sneakers and crossing his legs beneath him on the comforter.

“Can I sit on your bed?” Sue asked. “All this—” she waved her hands around, indicating the explosions, which Peter could no longer hear, and the day so far. “Really tiring,” she said, and shrugged, apologetically.

A specter of Aunt May rose in his mind, a reminder that he was the *host*, and that he’d forgotten his manners! He jumped forward, “Sorry,” he said, “yes, uh, I don’t think we have enough seats for everyone, but you all can sit wherever. Yes! Does anyone want—” he cut himself off. “Sorry, I don’t think I can get refreshments at the moment, but—”

“Peter,” MJ said, and suddenly she was there, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Calm down. You’re not hosting a barbecue. We’re hiding from Joel and explosions and it just happens to be in your bedroom.”

Peter nodded, and those around the room who wanted to, started finding places to sit.

Sophie flopped onto the ground and pulled herself close to Peter's desk, putting her back against the hard surface, acting more like someone Peter's age than someone with a real adult job who worked as a tour guide at a superhero compound. Flash, ever the asshole, commandeered Peter's one nice chair, a plush saucer chair he kept in the corner of his room, next to his bookshelf. Tao took the desk chair, Sally, Yasmin, Sue, and Charles followed Ned onto Peter's bed, all of them bunching up so they could all sit on the (very comfortable) mattress, leaving a pile of shoes in the right angle between bed and wall. Abe and Tyler both sat on the floor as well, their backs against the edge of Peter's mattress, Tyler with his knees up to his chin, Abe sprawling like he owned the place. Cindy perched herself on Peter's work bench, being careful not to sit on the comm unit or the tools, and MJ kept standing, though she moved towards the wall to lean against it.

Peter turned to look at Mr. Harrington who shook his head. It looked like being in a student's bedroom was already too much for him, he couldn't add to the wrongness by *lounging on the floor* or relaxing in any way. Peter shrugged at the man, and Mr. Harrington shrugged back.

“Story time!” Ned demanded.

Peter scowled at him.

But, he had a point. Not that Peter wanted to tell a story, but that with Peter standing, and (almost) everyone else sitting and looking in his direction, it did sort of feel like he was making an announcement or something.

“You were saying,” Cindy prompted, “that you’re an intern at Stark Industries.”

“Right,” Peter said, and instinctively paused for Flash to say something derogatory. When Flash stayed silent, Peter looked at him, an eyebrow raised.

Flash shrugged. “I’m not so stupid to be fighting the *intern* thing when we’re literally sitting in what you claim to be *your bedroom* in the Avengers’ *Compound*.”

“Huh,” Peter said to himself, “didn’t know it did *that*.”

Flash rolled his eyes because no matter what, he was still an asshole.

“So yeah,” Peter said, focusing on Ned and trying to ignore the twelve other sets of eyes, staring at him from throughout the room. “I’ve been interning at Stark Industries, and, well, more specifically I intern for, uh, Tony Stark.”

He paused.

Cindy cleared her throat and said, “Yeah, Peter, we know who Tony Stark is.”

“Personal assistant to Tony Stark?” Flash asked, very drily, but didn’t say anything else.

Peter shrugged and then nodded. “I’ve been helping Tony in the lab for a while. The, um, Stark Industries labs, really.”

“Labs?” Sophie asked.

Peter winced. “Specifically, Tony’s lab.”

“*Tony’s* lab,” Sue said, emphasizing Tony’s name.

Peter frowned at her.

“You call your boss by his first name?” Sue prompted. She squinted at him.

Peter tilted his head to the side. “I mean, yeah. He requested it. And I, I kept calling him Mr. Stark *far* after he told me to call him Tony, but I’m not going to live in the man’s house and still call him mister anything.”

“Uh-huh,” Mr. Harrington said, neutrally, but with just a hint of disbelief. Not like he thought Peter was *lying* but like he couldn’t wrap his head around this whole situation.

“Anyway,” Peter said, “so I’ve been working for Tony for years, and like, obviously my aunt knows him, ‘cause like, she’s not going to let me intern for a guy she doesn’t trust, right?”

“Classic parent move,” MJ said with a nod.

“Gotta love Aunt May,” Ned said, as if she was not only Peter’s aunt, but Ned’s too.

“So they know each other,” Peter said. “And then,” he scratched the back of his head, “then my

aunt gets a call and it turns out she won this big, year-long world tour thing—”

“Through Princess Cruises?” Abe asked. “I heard of that one! It sounded neat.”

Peter nodded. “So, obviously she wants to go, and I want her to go because she deserves to have fun and she *has* the vacation time, stocked up from years of not going anywhere anyway, but I’m not eighteen so she doesn’t want to leave me alone for a year...”

“Thus living with Tony Stark,” Ned said.

Peter pointed at Ned. “Exactly.”

“Uhh,” Charles said, “why did she choose your boss for you to live with?”

“And why,” Mr. Harrington of all people added, “did he say *yes*?”

Peter opened his mouth and found that he didn’t have any better of an answer than he had before, when he was asked a very similar question over half a year ago, when he’d first moved in. So he said what he’d said then, though under scrutiny it wouldn’t bear up any better than it had before. “She trusts him to make sure I don’t hurt myself, using dangerous equipment in the lab, and like, I don’t know, she trusts him to make sure I get home ok after interning for the afternoon.” He shrugged.

Quite a few of the expressions around the room translated to, ‘*Are you serious?*’

“Peter,” Mr. Harrington said, putting a hand on his shoulder and saying, almost gently, “do I need to contact child protective services?”

Peter balked. “*Why?*”

“You’re aunt left you in the care of someone you aren’t related to, someone who doesn’t have legal guardianship over you, and someone who is your employer, in order to globe-trot.”

Peter sputtered. “Tony’s not—! He—!” He took a deep breath. “Ok, first of all, they took this decision very seriously and Pepper had—”

Someone (Peter couldn’t be fucked to figure out who, at the moment) gasped and said, “Pepper Potts?”

“—lawyers come and draw up papers,” Peter continued. “My aunt signed, Tony signed, even Pepper signed. There was so much signing! So, um, like, I am legally the ward of Tony Stark right now. It wasn’t—” he waved his hands around, desperate to show, *somehow*, that everything was very above-board and went through the right channels, “Nothing was sketchy about it! It’s all legal and fine and boring and normal. It’s not *weird*!”

“It’s actually *very* weird,” Sue said, and usually he liked Sue but right at that moment he wanted to never speak to her again.

“Sorry Peter,” Ned said, more casually than Sue had spoken, “it *is* kinda weird.”

“Betrayal!” Peter announced dramatically, and clutched at his chest. He turned to MJ and she nodded. He’d say she’d nodded apologetically, except mixed with that expression was a large dose of sarcasm.

“Gah!” Peter said.

“Tony Stark’s your *dad*,” Yasmin said, delighted, and clapped her hands together.

“More like step-dad,” Tyler said.

“Nothing like step-dad,” Abe corrected, “more like *adopted* dad.”

“Tony did not adopt me,” Peter said through gritted teeth. “He’s just, like, a mentor-slash-guardian who I have to legally live with because my aunt and the government say I’m too young to live by myself in an apartment in New York for a year.”

“So you don’t like living here?” Tao asked, mildly.

Peter narrowed his eyes at the man. “I like living here,” Peter said, and then blinked and swallowed, “but I do miss my aunt.”

No one said anything for a moment, and then Sue said, “Sorry Peter. We, uh, probably shouldn’t have pried.”

Ok. Sue was back in his good graces.

“It’s fine,” Peter said. “I’d want to know, too, if it turned out a classmate could like, access top-secret locations or whatever.”

“Is this a top-secret location?” Yasmin asked, too much excitement leaking into her voice.

“Uh,” Sophie said, from her curled-up position on the floor. “Kind of, yes. I mean, I’m pretty sure not even the head of security is allowed in this section of the building.”

“Happy?” Peter asked. “Nah, he comes by all the time. He’s the only one Thor will share his pop tarts with, but he sucks at Wii Tennis. Happy, I mean, not Thor. Thor’s not great at it either, but...”

Eyes were once again all on him, and he said awkwardly, suddenly remembering himself, “Ah, right. Casually mentioning the Avengers comes off as weird.”

“I’m going to yell at my coworkers for not mentioning you exist,” Sophie said, eyes wild.

“Donna and Jay?” Peter asked.

Sophie nodded.

Peter pursed his lips. He liked Donna and Jay, and it stung a little to hear that they hadn’t mentioned his existence to a new employee. “I’m sure they had a good reason,” Peter said, trying to convince himself more than her.

She sighed.

There was another moment of awkward silence.

“So, uh,” Sally said, “what now?”

“Yeah,” Flash said. “Are we just gonna wait around till we think it’s safe, or what?”

“FRIDAY,” Peter said, “any news on how the fight is going?”

“The villain has been apprehended,” she said easily, sounding much more herself. “My sensors indicate three more explosive devices located around the perimeters of the compound, which are

being dealt with by Agents Romanoff and Barton, and Captain Rogers. Boss is currently working on my coding, making sure the virus has been eradicated. For your safety, please remain in your current location until all explosives have been taken care of.”

“Thanks, FRI,” Peter said.

“So, more waiting,” MJ said.

Tao tugged on the straps of his camera. “Anyone have a way to pass the time he asked?”

“Movie?” Peter suggested, “Or Rummy?”

“What are you, eighty?” MJ asked. “Might as well have said Old Maid or Whist.”

“Crazy eights,” Tyler offered.

“Go fish,” Sue said.

“I like Go fish,” Ned said.

“Let’s play Go Fish,” Yasmin agreed.

“Why not something that *doesn’t* make us look like three year olds,” Cindy said.

“Or retirees,” MJ agreed. “Like Slaps. Or War.”

“Too violent,” Charles complained.

“Let’s just watch a movie,” Abe said.

Flash made a big show of looking around the room, swinging his head back and forth, and then said, all smarmily, “I don’t see a tv, so I don’t think *that’s* going to happen.”

Peter coughed into his fist and then said, “Uh, FRIDAY, initiate protocol ‘Let’s all go to the lobby.’” Much like with the security doors in the hall, a seamless section of ceiling broke away, and a wide, thin LED screen started to descend.

“That’s so cool!” Ned exclaimed.

“Why is everything a protocol?” Abe asked. “Like, first just getting into your room, and now this? Why can’t you just say, ‘Hey, sky-robot, can I get my tv, please?’ Like, that can’t be that hard, can it?”

Sky-robot???

“Uh,” Peter said, “sorry, that’s kind of— or like, it’s an in-joke between, uh, Tony and I. He— he used to make a lot of protocols for me? For like, my, ah, safety. Around the lab. So I— like, just to pick on him a *little*, I do the same for mundane things, and he acts like he hates it.” He shrugged.

“You like to pick on Tony Stark,” Tao said, sounding a little strangled.

Peter winced and then shrugged. “Not, like, not in a *mean* way.”

“You’re so weird,” Sue said.

Damnit Sue! Back on the bad list.

“What other protocols do you have?” Ned asked, sounding eager. Ned already knew some of them, the Spiderman ones at least, but the ones around the compound? Peter hadn’t thought to mention them to Ned. Not on purpose, it just hadn’t occurred to him. It was just a thing about his house.

“Uh,” Peter said.

“You don’t have to tell us,” Sue said, kindly.

Gosh, Sue. Pick a side!

“Please don’t tell us,” Sophie begged.

Well now Peter *had* to tell her, because he was secretly, very deep down in his soul, a contrary bastard.

“Well,” he said, with more enthusiasm than he had before, “the ‘I’m a growing boy’ protocol orders us dessert, the ‘up and at ‘em’ protocol sends a wake-up message to everyone in the building, and the ‘I’ve got a jar of dirt’ protocol makes Pirates of the Caribbean movies start playing immediately on whatever device is closest.”

“That last one was very specific,” MJ said.

Peter shrugged. “It comes up more than you’d think.”

“Pirates of the Caribbean?” Tyler asked. “Man, I haven’t seen that movie in *years*.”

“Ooohh,” Yasmin said, “Let’s watch that!”

“We probably won’t have time to finish it,” Peter warned.

Yasmin shrugged. “It’s not like none of us have seen it before.”

Sophie made a noise and Yasmin’s eyes snapped to her.

“Really?” Yasmin asked, surprised, “You’ve *never* seen it? It’s a staple!”

Sophie blinked. “Of course I’ve seen it. Them. I’ve seen all of them. It wasn’t that, I just... I just wasn’t expecting to spend today in a teenager’s bedroom watching early 2000’s action movies.”

“I know that feeling,” Mr. Harrington said, his voice tight.

“Same,” Tao agreed.

“Yeah, well,” Peter said, trying, and failing, not to be peeved, “I didn’t expect to have guests in my bedroom, let alone *adults*, but no one thought to warn me that a bad guy was going to break in and start blowing up the place, so.” He shrugged. “Tough cookies.”

Mr. Harrington shifted awkwardly, but Tao only grinned at Peter.

“Movie!” Ned chanted from Peter’s bed. “Movie! Movie! Movie!”

Yasmin joined him.

“Anyone object?” Peter asked the group of them.

There was shaking of heads, some shrugging. Flash opened his mouth, but before he could say

anything Peter said, “FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Peter?” Friday asked.

“Initiate ‘I’ve got a jar of dirt’ protocol.”

“Right away, Peter,” FRIDAY said, her synthetic voice full of genuine amusement, and then Peter’s huge, flat, television screen flickered to life.

Chapter End Notes

Yo, I'm starting grad school tomorrow, and I'm honestly not sure how I'm gonna handle going back to school *and* working full time, so I think I might vanish off the face of the earth? I've been writing ahead in case I lose steam, so I have like at least one more chapter I can put out this week, but I legit have no idea if I'll have time to write while in school/work mode :/

I promise I'm gonna finish this fic. I'll make it work. And I 'll see how much free time I have and try to adjust to writing time being depleted. We'll see. And I apologize for any future hectic posting schedule things I might find myself doing

Delinquent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They got farther in the movie than Peter had expected, but maybe defusing bombs and then dealing with the aftermath of said bombs involved more work than Peter thought.

Elizabeth Swann had just set fire to the rum (“Why is the rum gone?”) when Peter felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see a text from Tony. Several texts from Tony, all with exclamation points. Peter couldn’t remember the last thing he’d texted Tony so he scrolled up to see his last message:

Tony, what’s going on? Why’s FRI freaking out?

And Tony’s response, more than an hour later, was first:

What do you mean? Are you here? Peter, are you in the building?

And then almost immediately following that:

Peter! There’s a face-snatching villain on the loose, setting bombs and messing with FRIDAY’s code. Get somewhere safe and STAY THERE.

Don’t trust anybody. If one of us approaches you, test us! It could be that chameleon motherfucker. Think he got in with the tour group.

And then very, very belatedly, Tony had texted:

Wait! Peter are you SKIPPING SCHOOL? I’m so proud, and also extremely angry. Your Aunt is going to kill me, and then I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your life. Skipping school!

Peter’s phone buzzed again, this time a text *not* from Tony. He exited Tony’s text thread to see that the text message had been from Steve. Which meant that, probably, all the Avengers were safe. If both of them had time to be texting Peter everyone must be ok and the villain dealt with.

Steve’s text read:

Tony tells me you’re skipping classes. Peter, I’m very disappointed in you, but I know you wouldn’t skip without just cause. Next time come talk to one of us. Don’t sacrifice your education without seeing if asking for help can solve the problem first. We’re going to have to have a very serious talk.

Peter couldn’t decide if he was going to laugh or cry.

His phone buzzed several more times, and Peter decided: he was going to cry. Tony had apparently told *all* of the Avengers that Peter had skipped school and come back home, because suddenly they were *all* texting him.

Wanda:

I never got a proper education. Do not waste your chance

Thor:

Young Peter! A warrior must learn in order to achieve great things! Do not squander your

intelligence by avoiding intellectual enrichment

Clint:

Heard you skipped school! Good for you! I'm gonna give you the best fucking high-five ever. It's good for you to slack off every once in a while

Sam, the most casual of them all:

Hey Peter, heard you didn't go to school today. Do you want to talk about it?

Sam was his new favorite.

Bucky texted:

Don't listen to Steve. He missed like one out of every four days of school and he turned out ok. Don't let the whole, 'Don't disappoint Captain America' schtick fool you. Just tell him you've been having a hard time, maybe sniffle a little, and he'll melt

Bucky was also his favorite.

Bruce texted:

Peter, did something happen?

Rhodey texted:

Peter, playing hooky is not a good look. We need to have a talk

Pepper texted:

If you needed a mental health day we could have called you in sick. You didn't have to cut class behind our back. We would have helped you out. We're here for you

Ouch.

Natasha texted only three sets of the watching-eyes emoji, and Vision texted:

Are you watching Pirates of the Caribbean without me? I thought we were saving that for Friday movie night.

Because the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise was Vision's favorite movie series, currently (until last month it had been the Star Trek reboot movies, and boy had that caused hours worth of debate between the Avengers), and Vision was still enough of an android to know when someone in the compound was using FRIDAY to watch his favorite movies without him.

He was also the one Peter texted back first.

Sorry, Peter typed, it was an emergency.

Vision's reply was instantaneous. *Ah, it read, I understand.*

Peter then went back to Tony's text and replied: *I'm not technically skipping school. Should I wait for you to give the all clear or can I come out now?*

Peter waited a moment (Elizabeth agreed to marry Norrington in order to save Will), and finally Tony texted: *I'll come get you. Where are you at?*

As if Tony couldn't just ask FRIDAY.

Though, maybe FRIDAY was still recovering from whatever Not-Joel had done to her, and that idea made a small lump form in Peter's throat. He hoped she was ok.

My bedroom, Peter typed, and then hit send.

Peter felt a small pressure on his shoulder, and he turned his head just slightly, only to find that MJ, who'd sat next to him on the floor when the movie started, had her chin hooked over his shoulder and was reading his texts.

"Everyone thinks I'm cutting class," Peter whispered to her. "Steve said he's disappointed in me, and Pepper wants me to know that if I had just *asked* to stay home from school we could have worked something out because they're all *here* for me. Emotionally."

MJ snorted in amusement. Loudly.

"Shhhh!" Yasmin hushed.

Contradictingly, Ned said, "Wait! What's so funny?"

A couple of the kids groaned, but Ned, unperturbed, started shuffling around the bed, getting in everyone's way on accident, trying to find a way off.

"Ned!" Sue squealed as he pushed her into Sally, and Charles ended up just jumping off the bed and stumbling over Abe's sprawled limbs just to give Ned access to the floor. Ned, finding the way to the floor open, crawled off the bed and scurried over to Peter, making little noise in his socks.

"Really, Leeds?" Flash asked. "You can't stand being apart from Parker for more than an *hour*?"

"I mean," Ned said simply, "he *is* my best friend."

"You're also nosy," MJ told Ned.

"But you were *whispering*," Ned said. "And laughing! I missed the joke." He pouted, and it made Peter laugh.

"It wasn't that big a deal," Peter said.

"Oh just spill it Parker," Flash said, "or Leeds will just keep interrupting the movie."

Peter cleared his throat and decided that he didn't want the whole decathlon team knowing that he got scolded by the Avengers, en masse, for skipping. Which, no, he *hadn't* been skipping, but it was just a huge ass conversation Peter did not want to have. Instead he said, "We should probably all get up anyway. Tony said he'll be here to clear the area, and then we can leave... my bedroom." He frowned.

"And go *home*," Sophie said with emphasis. "I can't wait to eat my weight in Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia and fall asleep in the bath."

"Awww," Tyler said, "so we won't get to finish the tour?"

"No," Mr. Harrington said. "We're going to have to tell your parents what happened today on the field trip, and then prepare for the backlash of that."

There was a general groaning at that pronouncement, and Peter blanched as well. He didn't want anyone telling his Aunt about today.

"My mom is going to go ape-shit," Charlie said.

"Same," Yasmin said with a sigh.

Peter stood and stretched, and Sophie, with a sigh, stood as well, which triggered everyone else to start standing as well, working out kinks in their backs from sitting in awkward places and positions, and putting shoes back on their feet.

“So,” Flash said, his voice oddly neutral, “we’re going to meet Tony Stark?”

Peter grimaced because yes, they were. They were all going to meet Tony Stark, and Peter hadn’t even thought of that until Flash had spoken.

“You know, Flash,” MJ said, “if you’re thinking that you’ll be able to disprove Peter’s claims by asking Stark, you’re *going* to be disappointed.”

“I’m not dumb enough to not have figured *that* out by now,” Flash said between gritted teeth.

“Huh,” MJ said, looking at him with a mockingly impressed expression, “It can learn!”

“Don’t antagonize him,” Peter said. He didn’t really want to be defending Flash. Flash was an asshole. But he also didn’t want MJ to be as rude to Flash as Flash was rude to Peter, because that’s no way to solve anything. All that would do is make Flash put his hackles up and snap back, when instead what they should be doing was *rewarding* Flash’s good behavior, in order to teach him that not being an asshole was what he *should* be doing.

If it worked for training dogs, it had to work for training classmates, right?

Peter sighed.

Something was wrong with his brain.

And then FRIDAY said, “Boss is outside your door, requesting access. Access granted?”

Peter opened his mouth to say that *of course* Tony had permission to enter, and then Tony’s previous warning about Not-Joel being someone who could take identities entered his head, and he said, instead, “Could you patch in his audio?”

“Of course, Peter,” FRIDAY said.

A second later Tony’s voice piped in. “What is it, Peter? FRIDAY said you wanted to ask me something before opening the door?” He scoffed. “You’re not trying to hide from me because you got caught skipping, are you? Because I gotta say, Peter, skipping school is dumb, but this is dumber. I’m not *Jack Torrence*.”

Peter blinked. “Jack Torrence?”

Tony sighed. “The dad from the Shining? Peter, how have you lived sixteen years and never seen the Shining? What I *meant* was, I’m not like an abusive parent or anything.”

“Oh,” Peter said, “Jack Torrence is a bad dad? Why didn’t you just say Denethor?”

“Denethor?” someone hissed from behind Peter.

Peter turned to partially face the person who’d spoken. It was Sally. “You know,” Peter said, “from Lord of the Rings? He’s Boromir’s dad, and the Steward of Gondor? And like, after he finds out Boromir died he, like, tries to kill his other son, Faramir? Because he wished Faramir had died instead of his brother? He was an ass.”

“I know who Denethor is,” Tony said, drily.

“Oh,” Yasmin said, “you should have said Mother Gothel.”

“Tony Stark is not Mother Gothel,” Cindy snapped.

In a harder voice than Tony had been using before, he asked, “Peter, who’s in there with you?”

“Uh,” Peter said, “my class? Like I said, I’m not *technically* skipping school.”

Tony sighed. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to imply, Peter, but I’d really appreciate it if you’d just come out here and explain it to me using your words.”

Peter grimaced.

“Let’s go,” Flash said.

“Just,” Peter started, “you said the bad guy can steal identities? Like, faces and voices. You might be him pretending to be Tony.”

“You want me to prove I’m Tony Stark?” Tony said, voice laced with amusement.

“Yeah,” Peter said, “I’m not going to put the lives of my classmates in danger just because you may be who you say you are. I mean, he had Tao, and the rest of us, fooled for *hours*. I’m going to need proof.”

“The Chameleon was *with* you?” Tony demanded, voice stern once more. Then he sighed. “I’m going to need details asap, Sport, or I’m going to start going grey.”

Tony was already going grey, he just dyed his hair often enough that it was mostly not noticeable. But if Tony thought that Peter, with his enhanced senses, and the fact that they *lived* in the same house and saw each other every day, didn’t know that Tony was already going grey then he was being willfully ignorant. Or just lying to himself.

“One,” Peter said, “Chameleon? Two, I told you never to call me Sport again.”

“Chameleon’s what he called himself, once he stopped becoming people he wasn’t and we figured out *he* was the intruder. And, you’re right, sorry for calling you Sport, Champ.” Peter could hear the smile in his voice.

It was Peter’s turn to sigh. “Please just prove you’re you, Tony.”

“Hmmm,” Tony said, “what can I say to prove I’m me.”

“Mr. Stark,” Ned piped up, “maybe you could tell him something only you’d know about Peter?”

“Maybe something embarrassing he did?” MJ suggested.

“Is that you Ned?” Tony asked, and then gleefully said, “Wait, Peter, do you have a *girl* in your room?”

Peter could feel his cheeks heating up. “That was MJ Tony! And yes, I’ve got *several* women in my room. We were hiding from Not-Joel. I mean, the Chameleon.”

“Ah,” Tony said, “MJ! Peter talks about you often. Glad I finally get to meet you.”

Peter’s cheeks warmed even more. “Yeah,” he muttered, “that’s Tony.”

“Ok,” Tony said, “what’s something only I know about Peter?”

Peter really didn’t need any more proof. Only Tony could be like this. No one could imitate this intrinsic level of Tony-ness. He opened his mouth to say as such, to stave off Tony saying something embarrassing, or worse, implying something about him being Spiderman, but he was too late.

“Well,” Peter heard Tony saying, as he waited on baited breath for what his friend and mentor would say to horribly embarrass him in front of the entire Academic Decathlon team and their *teacher*, “how about how much of a mother hen he is in the lab?”

Peter squawked. He hadn’t expected *that*. “I am *not*.”

Tony scoffed. “You *are*. You’re always ‘Tony I think you shouldn’t set that on fire,’ ‘Tony, when’s the last time you ate?’ ‘Tony if you don’t put down that blow torch right now I’m calling Pepper and letting her cart you off, and then I’m putting the lab in lockdown until you’ve had at *least* ten hours of sleep.’”

“That was one time,” Peter said.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “but I have *many* more examples. What about that time you sicced DUM-E on Ross to get him to leave faster when he was annoying me with his assholery and general disregard for human rights? Or that time you hid the autoclave because you thought I was going to burn myself? Or that time I tried to test my gauntlet at the kitchen table and you made FRIDAY shut down the entire building so I had nothing to aim at. The *entire building*, Peter.”

Peter winced. “Ok, I’ll... admit to that one.”

“It’s not a *bad* thing, necessarily,” Tony said. “It means I can trust you to use my equipment without blowing anything up because you’re careful.” He paused. “Was that good enough, Pete? Will you come out here now and explain to me why you brought your class home?”

“FRIDAY,” Peter said, embarrassed once more over his stupid protocols, “I will take the ring to Mordor.”

The door clicked open. Standing on the other side, clad partially in the Iron Man armor (the chest plate, one flank, and one shoulder piece still attached for some reason), and sweating and dirty as he always looked post-battle, was Tony.

“God, Peter,” MJ said, impossibly fond, “you’re such a *nerd*.”

Peter stuck his tongue out at her.

“C’mon Peter,” Tony said, “out to the living room. I refuse to cram myself into my ward’s bedroom with— how many other teenagers are there in there with you?”

Peter sighed. “A lot. I’ll— I’ll explain.”

Tony shrugged, and then turned on his heel and started back towards the living room. Peter followed, and everyone else followed in behind them. He knew that as soon as the last person cleared his door FRIDAY would lock the room up again, and sure enough, about halfway down the hall he heard the tell tale click of his bedroom door clicking locked.

In the living room, Tony gestured magnanimously to the various couches and armchairs, ottomans and single bean bag chair that Thor had found on craigslist and refused to part with. Tony then

stepped up to the door to the living room from the main hall and made sure it was closed.

“I’ll have someone send up food and beverages,” he said as he turned back around and cast an eye over the large group of people now seating themselves around the Avengers living room. “Hiding for your life tends to work up an appetite, or at least I find that’s— Sophie?” he cut himself off to ask.

Sophie, who’d claimed one of the chairs, timidly waved back at Tony.

Tony looked back over the crowd once more, slowly, and then turned a frown on Peter. “Were you on the tour scheduled for today?”

Peter nodded weakly.

Tony glanced once more at the teens in his living room and sighed. “Seeing as how Ned and MJ are both here, as well as, I assume, you’re Mr. Harrington—”

“You know my name?” Mr. Harrington interrupted in confusion.

Tony eyed the teacher. “You teach my ward. Of course I know your name. I know *all* of Peter’s teachers.”

“Wow,” Yasmin said, “Tony Stark knows the teachers at our *school*?! That’s crazy?”

Tony made a weird face. “How is that crazy? Don’t your parents know the names of your teachers?”

“Well, *yeah*,” Yasmin said, “but they’re my *parents*.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Right, well, it’s not like the kid’s been living with me since the school year started or anything. Or wait, yes he *has*.”

“Name another teacher!” Tyler demanded, and then added. “Pop quiz!”

“I’m not playing this game,” Tony said.

“Play the game, please?” Ned asked.

“You don’t have to play any games,” Peter said.

Tony sighed. “Warren,” he said, “Wilson, Cobbwell, Dell, Kramer. I could go on, but I’m more interested in how apparently,” he turned on Peter, “your Decathlon team won the tour competition and I didn’t know.”

Peter grimaced.

“Wait,” Abe said, “you didn’t *know*?”

Tony turned his gaze on Abe, and raised an imperious eyebrow.

Abe made a noise that sounded something like, “Urk.”

Peter elbowed Tony in the stomach. “Stop trying to intimidate my classmates.”

Tony rolled his eyes but rocked back on his heels and quit his intimidation routine, which was a mask Peter usually only saw him put on when faced with angry board members, stuck-up

politicians, Justin Hammer, and Dr. Doom.

“Fine,” Tony said to Peter, “but I want to know why you didn’t tell me it was *your* team that won the competition.”

Abe made another noise, and this time Tony rolled his eyes at Abe.

“No,” Tony told the kid, “I *did not know*.”

“But,” Abe started, “I thought...” and then he trailed off.

Tony’s imperious eyebrow raise was back. “You thought what?”

“I just thought,” Abe said, awkwardly, not quite meeting Tony’s or Peter’s eyes, “well, after we found out he, like, *lives* here, I figured Peter pulled some strings to get us this tour.”

“I wouldn’t have done that,” Peter said, offended.

Tony nodded with a sigh. “I keep telling him it’s ok to use his connections but he keeps telling me it’s ‘*cheating*.’ No, it’s merely taking advantage of the resources to hand.”

“It would have been unfair,” Peter said. “Not to mention, I didn’t even *want* us to win. I was kind of hoping really badly we would have lost that one too.”

“Why?” Ned whined.

“Yeah!” Sue added, “this was a cool field trip! Or, well, the first half was at least.”

“Because,” Peter told them, “this is my house.”

“Yeah,” Tyler put in, “a really *lit* house.”

“I’d want to show it off,” Charles added.

“Yeah?” Peter asked him. “You’d like it if all of your classmates and your teacher were going to take a tour of *your house*?”

Charles made a face. “Well, *no*, but this isn’t just a *house*, it’s—”

“It’s Peter’s home,” MJ cut him off. “It’s where he lives.”

Charles winced and then seemed to think about it. He bit his lip. “Ok, yeah, I get that.”

“So,” Tony surmised, eyeing Peter with amusement, “you tried to play it off like this *wasn’t* where you lived, didn’t you?”

Peter shrugged. “Well, you know how I didn’t want anyone at school to know I lived here? Because I wanted my life to stay *sane*? Yeah, well, that hasn’t changed.”

Tony laughed.

“So this is sane, is it?” Flash asked.

“It *would* have been,” Peter muttered, “if Not-Joel hadn’t ruined the party. We could have gone the whole day with no one finding out I live here, and no one recognizing me. That would have been swell.”

“Swell,” Tony scoffed, “stop talking to Steve so much. You’re picking up his old-people slang.”

Yasmin squeaked at the mention of Steve, which Peter and Tony both ignored with practiced ease.

“How did you think you’d get away with that?” Tony asked Peter. “Someone was bound to recognize you eventually, and then they’d say hey, and *bam*, the jig is up. You know, if you’d just *told* us you were coming we could have pretended not to know you or something.”

“First of all,” Peter said, getting so comfortable here in his living room, talking to Tony like he always did, that he forgot, for the most part, that there were other people in the room with them, “no one *did* figure it out. Sam did a whole meet-and-greet in the gym and didn’t even notice I was there! Because I’m good!”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” Peter said, “it’s because I borrowed Ned’s hoodie and kept my eyes on my feet, but still!”

Tony tugged on the sleeve of Peter’s neon green hoodie. “I was wondering why you were wearing this monstrosity.” He glanced at Ned. “Sorry, Ned.”

“No worries,” Ned said, sounding too ecstatic from being in the same room as Tony to be offended.

“Good work on the espionage front,” Tony told Peter, “but again, if you’d just *told* us,” he shrugged, and Peter winced, because he hadn’t expected Tony to feel *hurt* that Peter hadn’t told them he was part of the tour. But obviously Tony *was* hurt, at least a little. It wasn’t anything too big, no one else in the room would have been able to distinguish Tony’s naturally casual tone with this fake-casual one he had going on now, but Peter knew.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Peter said, quietly, stepping a little further away from the furniture full of eavesdropping classmates. “I just,” he sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if he’d find a concise way of explaining himself written on one of the ceiling tiles. “I was worried that if I told anyone I was coming here they would have, I don’t know, made a big deal out of it? Like, if I had mentioned that I was coming to tour the building, with my classmates, don’t you think Clint would have tried something? And Wanda? They wouldn’t have meant to do anything *bad*, but they would have shown up, when they normally wouldn’t have, and would have, like, subtly teased me.” Tony opened his mouth, but Peter steamrolled over him. “Even if I had asked everyone to *please* not say anything to reveal that I live here, or to *please* not embarrass me, you can’t tell me that *someone* wouldn’t decide that they’d visit just to mess with me. Not to out me, not to *actually* complicate my life, but just to tease me a little, secretly.

“Only that never works out. Like, they would have accidentally said something, or tried to be clever by making allusions, and one thing could easily lead to another, and suddenly everyone knows I live here. And I really, *really* didn’t want that to happen.”

Tony sighed, and then spoke just as quietly as Peter had, too quietly to be heard by those sitting on the furniture, no matter how they leaned forward like they wanted to work out, desperately, what Peter and Tony were talking about. “I still wish you’d trusted me enough to warn me you’d be here. If only because then I could have told you the tour’s full itinerary. The ending was going to be a big, “Surprise Meet the Avengers” type deal.”

Peter deflated. “I would have been recognized,” he said. “And without warning the group to pretend not to know me—”

“They would have called you out at once,” Tony said. “Yeah. Me too, by the way. If it had turned out that *you* were on the tour, I think I would have initially assumed you’d kept it from us as a surprise *for* us, and I would probably have gone over the top, pulled you out of the crowd, bragged about you, etcetera. You’d definitely have been outed.”

Peter deflated even more, his shoulders hunching as he processed that, the way the day could have gone. “Dang,” he said, because he wanted to say ‘Fuck’ but didn’t want to curse in front of Mr. Harrington even if the man couldn’t hear him. He looked at Tony. “It *really* wasn’t because I don’t trust you though. I want you to know that. Of course I trust you. I trust every single one of the Avengers, but I *especially* trust you. Aunt May trusts you. I know if I’d told you you would have done everything in your power to make sure I felt safe, here, during the field trip. I know that. I just — unexpected things happen all the time, and I couldn’t stop thinking about what if someone said something on accident, just, let the beans spill *just a little*, and then... but it’s dumb now, right? Because everyone *does* know.” He looked over at his classmates, who were all suddenly acting like they weren’t watching Tony and Peter talk it out from across the room.

“Is it such a bad thing that they know?” Tony asked.

Peter shook his head. “I don’t know. Probably. I can’t wait to go to school Monday and find out if half the school now wants to be my best friend because I have an in with the Avengers, or if I’ll get stuffed in my locker because they’re jealous, or if I’ll get ignored because people think I’m getting special treatment, or if I’ll start getting special treatment. I’m one hundred percent sure that, at the very least, I will no longer have any anonymity.”

“Ah,” Tony said awkwardly. “That, yeah, that actually tracks.”

“Yeah,” Peter said with a sigh. “At least I won’t get any flack from people thinking I’m lying about my SI internship anymore.”

Tony narrowed his eyes and then motioned with his heads to the Academic Decathlon team. “None of these bozos were part of that crowd, were they?”

“Uh,” Peter said.

Tony focused back on Peter. “Who?”

Peter sighed. “Flash,” he said.

Tony raised his eyebrows and Peter clarified.

“Flash Thompson. The boy who looks like he’s chewing gravel.”

“*Flash*?” Tony questioned.

“A nickname,” Peter said. “His real name’s Eugene.”

Tony nodded once, like he was digesting that information, and then spun on his heel, and locking eyes on Flash, barked, “Eugene Thompson. You think my boy’s lying about having an internship at Stark Industries?”

Flash scowled. “Not anymore!”

“Good,” Tony said simply and turned back to Peter and said, “Well that’s all settled then.”

Peter laughed, but couldn’t help the hollow feeling he felt in the pit of his stomach. He *really* didn’t

want to go back to school on Monday. Maybe if he asked May he could be homeschooled—

Except, well, she'd probably say yes if he explained, but then he'd never see Ned or MJ, and he'd be sad to quit the Academic Decathlon team, and he really wanted to have at least *one* part of his life be normal.

School was normal.

No.

School used to be normal.

Bah.

Peter wanted to scream.

As soon as he got home he *would* scream. Or, well, he was home now, so actually, as soon as his *classmates left his home* he'd scream.

"As for the other thing," Tony said, still loud enough to be heard by the assembled teenagers, and *facing* said teenagers, "unfortunately none of you will be able to talk about any company secrets you saw here today, as per the multiple Non-disclosure agreements you and your guardians signed."

"Does that mean we can't tell our parents that we got attacked?" Yasmin asked.

"We didn't get attacked," Ned said, looking slightly put out at the thought of not being able to share today's excitement with anyone, including his entire extended family, "the building got attacked."

"We were harboring a villain in our tour group," Cindy said.

"We didn't know, though," Charles said.

"Which isn't nearly as much fun," Tyler pointed out.

Tony poked Peter's shoulder and Peter leaned close to him to quietly and quickly explain. "The Chameleon was disguised as Joel, the reporter. We didn't figure it out till he'd left and the alarms started going off."

Tony grimaced but just patted Peter's shoulder as the group continued chatting

"Going on a tour of the Avengers Compound with a villain in tow isn't *fun*, Charles," MJ said, gracefully ignoring that she'd just seen Peter and Tony have a tiny whispered conversation.

Sally made a noise, as if she begged to differ, but instead said, "It doesn't matter because we can't *tell* anyone about it."

"Well," Mr. Harrington said, looking oddly pleased, "one less thing for me to tell Principal Morita."

"Ehh," Tony said, his voice going up an octave, and then dropping back down to his normal range to say, "Not *quite* what I meant. We're not going to hide from the public that a villain attacked our compound. We try to be as transparent as possible with this sort of thing. We're not fans of hiding our actions as heroes, nor the actions of those trying to cause us, or the public, harm."

Which made the most sense from a PR standpoint, Peter knew. If it came out that the Avengers

were hiding that their compound got attacked, that would look bad, and if it came out that the Avengers were hiding that a group of High Schoolers got attacked at the compound, it wouldn't just look bad, it'd look suspicious, untrustworthy, like the Avengers had something to hide.

It would just be bad all around.

"So," Tony continued, "we'll be releasing a statement about what happened today to the public, and we, as both the Avengers, and Stark Industries, encourage you to talk about your experience to whatever degree makes you the most comfortable. Everybody's safety is our top priority."

Mr. Harrington suddenly looked a lot less pleased. He looked positively bummed.

"Then *what* company secrets were you talking about?" Sue asked Tony.

"Yeah," Tao said, "if we can talk about the Chameleon, which is *definitely* going to be on the news tonight, what else did we see that you need under lock and key?"

Tony reached a hand out and placed it softly, but protectively, around Peter's shoulders. Peter immediately felt his face heating up, but he didn't try and remove Tony's arm, or duck his head.

"We've kept it a secret, here at the Avengers Compound, that Peter is living with us," Tony said pleasantly. "He's a minor, who is neither a hero nor a full-fledged employee, and we don't want it getting out that he lives with us. For his own protection, you understand."

"If," Sophie said, perking up, "it came out that there was a teen living here, he could be the focus of future attacks."

Tony snapped the fingers of the hand not currently resting over Peter's shoulder, and pointed a finger gun at Sophie. "Exactly, Ms. Jackson. I knew there was a reason we hired you."

Peter thought for a moment she might blush under Tony's compliment, but she just nodded, sighed, and leaned back in her chair.

"So, what?" Flash asked. "We just can't tell anyone that Parker lives here?"

"Aww," Abe said sadly, and patted the phone in his pocket, like he'd been excited to tell someone just that exact fact, as soon as possible.

"Right on the money, Thompson," Tony said, speaking a little more aggressively than Tony usually used with teenagers or civilians (it made Peter's cheeks heat up even more, but he couldn't help but *smile* about it as well).

Tony surveyed the kids before him. "Not one word about Peter living here, Peter knowing me, Peter knowing the Avengers, Peter being attached to us in any way, shape, or form. Do you understand? If it gets out that anyone before me today has mentioned Peter's living situation or his relation to the Avengers in any capacity, Stark Industries will sue you for breach of contract. And being who I am, I can guarantee that any lawyer any of you can rustle up will pale in comparison to the multiple firms I have on retainer at this very moment." Tony smiled at them.

Peter had to blink at the man, because he'd never seen Natasha's shark/wolf/bear grin replicated so exactly on Tony's face before.

It was...

Scary.

Peter hadn't known that Tony's face knew how to do that.

Mr. Harrington gulped.

Ned looked at Tony with wide eyes, like he'd never seen the man before, and then looked at Peter with equally wide eyes.

MJ smirked. MJ always smirked. He knew she was as far from a weak link as he could get.

"Any questions?" Tony asked, and then without waiting for an answer, said "Good."

Peter loved this man. It wasn't a surprise, after living with Tony for almost a year now (dear god, had that much time already passed?). But still. If he didn't love Aunt May even more, he'd ask Tony to... adopt him or something. Tony was who Peter wished his Father had been. Not like Uncle Ben, because Uncle Ben had been so much to Peter and he'd never replace him, but Peter really couldn't be happier that Tony was in his life and was there for him, that the man cared so much.

"So," Cindy said drily, "you don't care if we go to a news reporter and spill our guts about this entire bizarro explosion field trip, but I can't tell my sister that my classmate lives with Tony Stark?"

"Co-*rrect*," Tony said, like a game show host. "See, for the first one, we're protecting *your* rights," he gestured to everyone sitting down, "to react to this traumatic experience in any way you see fit. To tell your story and share what information you deem important. To do what you need to do to feel safe, and feel like you still have autonomy over your lives. For the second one, we're protecting *his* right," Tony shook Peter's shoulder with the hand he still had lying there, "not to get attacked, held hostage, or *killed* on his way home from school, by a villain with an axe to grind against the Avengers. Because Peter is a minor, and a civilian, and doesn't deserve to put his life on the line just because his classmates think it'd be *cool* to tell their siblings, friends, grandmas, *whatever*, about it."

"Oh," Cindy croaked, and leaned back in her seat.

The implication of Tony's words weren't... completely true. Yeah, no one really wanted the world to find out Peter lived here, though it was more because Peter (and everyone else who cared about Peter) didn't want the press, the paparazzi to start hounding him. No one wanted him to be attacked by supervillains either, but that was generally less likely, and Tony knew that Peter could handle his own. So while Tony's words might be *factually* accurate, the implication that that was the reason no one knew Peter lived with the Avengers in the *first* place was wrong.

And it was perfect.

Because now no one would bug him about it *at all*, and no one at school besides the Academic Decathlon kids would even know, and Peter's school life *wasn't* ruined.

God, Tony was the best!

Tony surveyed the people taking up space in his living room, and then glanced at Peter out of the corner of his eye. His expression said he had something planned, but Peter didn't know what that something could be.

"Yo, Teach," Tony said, and Mr. Harrington's head shot up. And then he scowled.

"Yes?" Mr. Harrington asked, cautiously.

“Well,” Tony said, “since this field trip started off good— I hope— and then went sideways, what say we finish it off with a bang?”

Peter’s shoulders tensed. He didn’t know what Tony had planned, but worse than that, he was pretty sure that *Tony* didn’t know what Tony had planned.

“I don’t know...” Mr. Harrington said slowly.

“What do you mean, ‘off with a bang?’” MJ questioned, fully focused on Tony.

He wagged his eyebrows at her and she scowled

Tony sighed. “You’re no fun, friend-of-Peter. Don’t worry, there aren’t going to be any more explosions.”

“Did you just call me friend-of-Peter?” MJ demanded.

“Tony,” Peter said, “you know MJ’s name.”

“Why *not* explosions?” Charles asked, and then when he suddenly had everyone’s gaze directed fully on him, slid down his seat a little and said, “Fine. I didn’t want more explosions anyway.”

“What I *meant*,” Tony said, “is, since all the Avengers are in residence, and you *are* in our living room, why don’t I give them a shout? And maybe we can give you the rest of your tour, *very quickly*.”

“Yes!” Ned shouted.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Harrington said slowly. He checked his watch and grimaced. “I really *should* tell the principal immediately.”

“And you will,” Tony said, “but he wouldn’t *possibly* say no to this. Call him up, right now, and I’ll talk to him.”

Fuck, Peter thought. That was one way to do it. Give Tony a chance to speak and everything was lost. Tony, given the opportunity to persuade, would accept nothing less than the object of his focus walking away from the conversation being completely persuaded.

“Ok,” Mr. Harrington said, even more slowly, and yeah, that was it. Once Tony spoke to Principal Morita there was no chance this wasn’t going to go Tony’s way. “We *do* have the time. But don’t be disappointed if Mr. Morita says no.”

Tony made a gesture that could have meant ‘hurry it up’ or ‘give it here,’ and Mr. Harrington pulled his cell phone from his pocket, chose a contact, clicked on it, and then gave it to Tony, who put the phone on his ear and then turned around, putting his back to the assembled students, for some semblance of privacy.

Peter, well, Peter had enhanced hearing. The conversation went like this:

Morita: “Hello? Principal Morita speaking.”

Tony: “And this is Tony Stark.”

Morita: “*Excuse me?!?*”

Tony: “You have some students and a teacher, a Mr. Harrington, here for a tour at the Avengers

compound. I'm sure you're aware."

Morita: "Well, *yes*—"

Tony: "We had a bit of an incident up here, which your Mr. Harrington wanted to make you aware of. See, a villain attacked the compound—"

Morita: "The kids—!"

Tony: "Are fine. Everyone's fine."

Morita: "Where's Harrington?"

Tony: "He's here too. He wanted to call you, give you a heads up on the situation—"

Morita: "Good! Put him on!"

Tony: "Only, really, after such a trying day, don't you think these kids deserve the chance to finish the tour. Meet the Avengers. Learn about the heroes that exist today?"

Morita: "We need to get a hold of their *parents*—"

Tony: "You do that. By the time we have your students back at the school, you'll have called all of their guardians and told them of what has occurred."

Morita: "The students! They need to return as soon as—"

Tony: "Right. But, see, is it safe to have them traveling right now before there can be a full investigation? And really, we wouldn't want to scar these children any more than they already are. If they stay here, finish their tour, well, they'll have some happy memories to offset the ones they've already made today."

Morita: "But—"

Tony: "You're right, you're right, you should tell the parents of these students that you let them go on a dangerous field trip and then put a stop to any possible happiness or levity they may have gained from it."

Morita: "Now wait a min—"

Tony: "And then after they finish their tour we can have some Avengers escort them back to school. I mean, that would only be *fair*, after everything they went through. Nothing but the best protection for *your* students, am I right?"

Morita: "Absolutely! They deserve—"

Tony: "—the best. I agree. So you'll be at the school at the designated time? When the Students were supposed to return."

Morita: "Yes! Of course I'll be there."

Tony: "Good man!"

He ended the call.

Peter whistled. Tony most definitely had a way with words.

His “way” being “steamrolling over every other person in the conversation.”

It was a true talent.

Tony spun on his heel and smiled at Peter’s classmates, focusing mainly on Mr. Harrington. “Well,” Tony said, “That’s settled! Time for the tour!”

“Is the building,” Mr. Harrington asked desperately, “even *safe* for a tour.”

“We did hear a *lot* of explosions,” Sophie said quietly.

Tony frowned, which was the public-faced equivalent of him admitting that he hadn’t thought of that.

“Well,” he said, and then, “FRIDAY, what part of the tour’s itinerary are safe to bring— no, let’s not push our luck, is there any place in the building that was on the tour’s itinerary that was *completely untouched* by the Chameleon’s actions?”

“Several of the rooms selected to be shown during the tour were untouched,” FRIDAY said, “however, I took the initiative to formulate a route, and there are danger areas along each route except the route to the sub-basement.”

Tony clapped his hands together. “Excellent! Let’s go,” and he started back towards the door they’d originally entered the living room from.

Everyone looked around for a moment, startled.

“What...” Sophie started, as she slowly pushed herself to her feet.

Tony turned back at the door. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

For some reason, most of his classmates turned to *Peter* for guidance. Peter glanced at Tony, who was at that moment going through the door to the hall, leaving the door open behind him, and then he glanced to Ned, who looked at him with wide, hopeful eyes, and MJ, who shrugged. “Uh,” Peter said to his class. He thought about what sort of rooms were in the sub-basement. “I don’t think there’s anything dangerous down there,” he told them.

With doubtful looks the teens started levering themselves from the furniture. With a grimace Sophie and Tao did the same. Mr. Harrington got to his feet with a sigh.

“Children!” Tony snapped from the doorway, apparently having come back after noticing no one had been with him. “Let’s get a move on! Any slower and we won’t have time to do *any* touring before your principal expects us back.”

“Us?” Sophie asked.

“Not you,” Tony said, and then didn’t explain. He ducked back out of the doorway and into the hall.

“He’s escorting us back to school,” Peter explained to Sophie.

She mouthed the word, “Oh.”

“So!” Ned said, approaching Peter. “Where are we going?”

“Well,” Peter said, slowly making his way to the door, making sure everyone was following him

(he wasn't going to just leave someone in the Avengers living room without any supervision), "I'm not *positive*, but I have a pretty good idea."

Ned whined. "*Where?*"

Chapter End Notes

Yo, sorry for dropping off the face of the planet. Why does school exist? How do people be productive? Anyway, hope this finds all of you well :)

The Infamous Prom Photo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The group of them got to the door to find Tony was just outside, leaning against the wall, focused on his phone. He looked up at Peter and Ned, and then looked past them to the rest of the class.

“Sophie,” Tony said, “take up the rear, will you? Make sure we don’t have any stragglers.”

Sophie sighed, quietly, and then in a voice that held none of the idolization or awe he’d heard in her voice when speaking of, and to, any of the Avengers earlier in the day, said, “Of course, Mr. Stark.”

He quirked a smile at her and turned once more on his heel, leading the group down the hall. Once the last of them had cleared the door, Peter heard it slide shut with a satisfying *clunk*.

“Ok, FRIDAY,” Tony said as they walked, “can you have the team gather downstairs for me?”

“Of course, Boss,” FRIDAY said.

“Mr. Stark,” Ned said, speaking up, not having lost any of *his* idolization or awe, “will you tell us where we’re going?”

Tony looked over his shoulder at the assembled teens, and the three adults following close behind them (there was none of the spread-out ease they’d walked with earlier. Everyone was scrunched together, and Peter saw small amounts of desperation on his peers’ expressions, desperation, no doubt, to not be left behind, unprotected).

“What?” Tony said, “Peter hasn’t told you?” His eyes were practically *sparkling*.

Peter frowned at him. “I just thought it’d make a nice *surprise*.”

Tony laughed.

“C’mon, Peter,” Ned said, elbowing Peter’s stomach. “Please? Just a hint?”

“Leave him alone, Ned,” MJ said. “Don’t you want to be surprised?”

Ned pouted.

“Boss,” FRIDAY cut in, “Captain Rogers would like a word.”

“Sure,” Tony said, tapping his ear, “route it to my—”

But apparently Steve couldn’t wait, because the man’s voice cut Tony off, coming from the speakers that FRIDAY usually spoke through.

“Tony,” Steve said, sounding somewhere between worried and angry. Not angry-angry, but resignedly frustrated. Steve sounded like a mix of concerned and exasperated. “Why do you want us to meet you downstairs? Is this about Peter? Have you found him yet?”

“I’m right here, Steve,” Peter called.

“Peter!” Steve said. “Good! Glad to know you’re safe, now *why in the Sam Hell were you in the building!?*” His voice echoed harshly down the hall, and Peter winced.

Tony, because he was *Tony*, laughed.

They moved into a stairwell, the elevators being off-limits until they could be inspected to make sure they were up to snuff, and Steve’s voice followed them.

“Really, Peter,” Steve said. “What *happened?*”

“Peter,” Bucky’s voice said—so apparently at least Bucky and Steve were in the same room, “remember what I said, and don’t let this loud mouth tell you what for.”

“Bucky!” Steve said, scandalized.

Tony laughed even harder.

“Oh my god,” Ned whispered, voice scratchy from trying to keep from screaming, “That’s Captain America!”

“And the Winter Soldier!” someone else whispered, from somewhere behind them.

Peter could feel his face heating up, and he tried to ignore the fact that his classmates could see him blushing, probably.

“I was on the tour, Steve,” Peter squawked.

“You were on the tour?” Bucky asked.

“And you didn’t *tell us?*” Steve asked. “Wait, *why* were you on the tour?”

Peter sighed. “It was my Academic Decathlon team that won the contest.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “Still, why didn’t you tell us? Was it going to be a surprise?”

Peter rolled his eyes.

“Leave the kid alone, Steve,” Bucky said. “Peter, congrats on your team winning the competition.”

“Thanks,” Peter said.

Unable to hold back any longer, Ned also said, “Thanks Mr. Barnes!”

“Uh,” Bucky said, suddenly sounding self-conscious. “Is that Ned?”

“Oh my god,” Ned whisper-shouted, “Bucky Barnes *recognizes me.*”

“Peter only talks about you and Michelle all the time, Ned,” Steve said drily.

Ned squealed.

“All the time?” MJ asked, she looked to Peter. “Wow, lame. Sounds like you *like* us or something.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “We’re only *best friends*, MJ. Of course I talk about you.”

“Does that mean the rest of your tour group is with you?” Bucky asked.

“Yes,” Peter said, and so did Cindy, Yasmin, Charles, Ned, and Sophie.

“Ah,” Steve awkwardly. He cleared his throat. “Well, congrats to all of you on winning the competition, and also congratulations on you all winning semi-finals.”

“Thank you!” Ned said.

“Oh my god,” Sally said, “Captain America knows about our Academic Decathlon semi-finals!”

“Does that mean *all* of the Avengers know about our Decathlon competitions?” Flash asked.

“Well duh,” Tony said. “We all know when an important meet or competition or whatever is coming up because Peter gets *super boring* to be around.”

“Because I’m *studying* Tony,” Peter chided.

“You tell ‘em, Pete,” Bucky said.

“Studying is very important, Tony,” Steve said.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah yeah, just get everyone to the sub basement Captain Boring.” Bucky snickered. “The Chameleon kinda ruined the kids field trip, and I thought I’d give them at least something memorable about this trip that’s *positive*.”

Steve sighed. “Alright, see you all soon.”

“And,” Peter cut in loudly, “can you please tell everyone I *didn’t* skip school?”

Bucky laughed at him.

“Especially Pepper,” Peter said.

“I’ll pass on the message,” Steve said drily, and then they were both gone.

“Parker got scolded by the Avengers,” Flash said with a snicker.

“At least that means he *knows* the Avengers,” Ned snapped back.

“Peter didn’t get scolded,” Tony said, “Captain Bossypants was just concerned.”

“It didn’t sound like Sergeant Barnes was concerned,” Sue said.

“Oh he wasn’t,” Tony said with a laugh.

Peter sighed. “Bucky,” he said, “*encourages* bad behavior. So does Clint for that matter.”

It was Tony’s turn to sigh. “That doesn’t surprise me in the least.” He turned to the class, as he reached the bottom of the stairwell. “Hawkeye,” he told them, “had an *alternative* education, and doesn’t really respect the public school curriculum.”

“Does that mean he went to Private school?” Yasmin asked.

Tony laughed so hard he had to lean against a wall to keep himself upright. “No!” he gasped out between laughs. “Absolutely did not!” He wiped tears from his eyes, levered himself off the wall, and exited the stairwell, still chuckling softly.

Peter sighed and then followed, as did his teammates.

“So,” Tony said, after he’d mostly pulled himself together, “we’re almost there, and all of the Avengers *should* be assembled by now, so if you haven’t thought of any questions yet, *now*’s the time to do so!”

“Oh my god,” Tyler said. “I can’t believe this is real.”

“Same,” Sally said.

“Me too,” Sophie agreed, sounding much less enamored with the idea than the two students.

“Now,” Tony said to himself, “where *did* I put that room?” He tried a door, ducked his head inside, and then stepped back and closed it, before moving down the hall. “Not that one,” he said. They approached another door and Tony tried again. This time when he closed the door, it was with a frown on his face. “I don’t remember installing a sensory deprivation chamber.”

“You don’t remember installing a lot of stuff,” Peter pointed out.

“Sensory deprivation?” Tao asked.

“It can be very meditative,” MJ said. “Like floating in the void.”

“You’ve been in one?” Sally asked.

MJ shrugged.

“Was it weird?” Ned asked.

MJ shrugged again, making it obvious she’d say no more.

Tony opened another door, and this time held it open long enough for everyone to get a look inside.

“It looks like a garden,” Charles said in awe.

“We’re underground, right?” Cindy asked. “It looks like we’re in a greenhouse.”

“The light fixtures are *very* high-tech,” Tony said. “This is our very own reinforced zen garden.”

“For Bruce,” Peter said, because while he hadn’t really known this was down here, who else would it be for?

“For Bruce,” Tony agreed, closing the door, “though I find Wanda and Vision down here sometimes too. Occasionally the old Buckster.”

“He hates when you call him that,” Peter told Tony.

Tony grinned, “That’s why I call him that.” But his tone was more playful than antagonistic.

The next door they tried was, finally, the right one.

“A *bowling alley*?” Tyler asked. “You guys have an underground *bowling alley*?”

Tony snapped his fingers and shot Tyler a finger-gun. “Yes!”

“And,” Sam said, from further down the room, “it’s not one of those lame two-lane private bowling alleys. We’ve got *fifteen lanes*.”

They turned to look at Sam and found that, indeed, all of the Avengers were assembled across the

room. Some, like Steve, were still wearing their uniform, but most of them had changed into civilian clothing, mostly casual sweats and t-shirts, which was normal post-battle wear. Had to be comfy after getting beat up.

A table had been set up near with hors d'oeuvres layered on it (food, promised by Tony), and was being slowly picked over by Clint and Thor. Peter decided to make a beeline over there as soon as there was a free moment.

"Hi again," Sam said with a wave. "Good to see you all made it." He was one of the ones who'd changed into civvies, and was rocking black sweatpants, a blue t-shirt, and shark slippers with pride.

"The Falcon!" Charles said, awed.

But Sam wasn't the only Avenger there, and slowly, one-by-one, they all stepped forward.

"So," Tony said, "what are we thinking? Photo-op, meet-and-greet, autographs?"

"I can do autographs," Steve said with a shrug.

"I want your autograph," Abe said, "so that works for me."

Steve laughed.

"Can I get a picture with the Black Widow?" Yasmin asked haltingly. She looked at Natasha with beseeching eyes. "Please? You're my hero!"

"Of course I'll take a picture with you," Natasha said, her tone sweet, verging on bubbly, which was very unlike herself, but it made Yasmin jump for joy (literally), so Peter thought it was probably on purpose. Natasha was wearing casual clothes that pretended to be nice. Form-fitting stretchy pants that looked like office slacks, and a blouse-like top that looked dressy except that Peter knew it was the top of a pajama set Natasha wore around the common areas all the time.

"Mr. Chen," Tony prompted, and Tao took a step forward. "Would you mind doing the honors? Taking any souvenir photos for this crowd. You will, of course, retain the right to use any of them in the article."

"I doubt there's going to *be* an article," Tao said. "It turned out the journalist was the— whatever you were calling the person who started blowing up the villain."

"Right," Tony said.

"But I don't mind being the photographer. That *is* what I'm here for. And I've worked enough of my sisters' weddings to know how to pose people and what not." He shrugged. "I can email them out in the next few days."

"Sounds perfect," Tony said.

"A couple *days*," Abe complained.

"What?" Tony asked in faux confusion, "You *don't* want your photos professionally edited?"

"Well," Abe said, "I guess that's fine then."

Tao pulled his camera up, and looked grateful to be back to doing his actual job, even though he probably hadn't planned on doing meet-and-greet style photo ops when he'd first been offered this

job.

“Me first!” Yasmin said, and bounded over to Natasha, who obligingly met her half-way.

“No fair!” Sally complained.

Yasmin stuck her tongue out

“Now, now,” Mr. Harrington said, “everybody’s going to get a chance.”

“Several chances,” Tony corrected. “Why not? These kids deserve to get as many pics with us as they want.”

“The back-drop for each one is going to be a *bowling alley*,” Peter couldn’t help but point out.

“I think that’s hilarious,” said Clint, who hadn’t changed out of his dusty uniform (slightly damaged) and was now lounging on the ball-return for lane six.

“You would,” Wanda said with a scoff. She was wearing a hoodie and had her hair up in a knotty looking bun at the back of her head. She also looked exhausted, but she had half a smile for the teens around her, so Peter hoped she didn’t actually mind doing this.

Tony gestured to the wall opposite the lanes. The wall was split into eight-foot alternating sections of pale hardwood and bright red wallpaper with geometrical designs in black and gold. It was definitely Tony’s modernistic take on classic bowling alley decor. “This should be fine.”

Tao shrugged and then nodded.

“What if I *want* the background to be a bowling alley?,” Tyler asked.

“Then we’ll do the bowling alley,” Tao said, with the tiniest strain of exhaustion in his voice.

Yasmin sidled closer to Natasha, who looked at the girl in faux surprise (as if anyone could startle Natasha Romanoff). “What do you want as the background?” Natasha asked her, softly.

Yasmin hummed, and then pointed to one of the large sections of hardwood. Natasha obligingly followed her over, and Tao started taking pictures, doing a nice one, a sincere one, and a silly one, before calling out, “Next!”

“Me next!” Charles said and stepped forward, looking over the assembled Avengers. “Can I have a picture with everyone?”

“Wait,” Yasmin said, “I want a picture with everyone too!”

Rhodey sighed, loudly, which attracted the group’s attention (and drew attention to the fact that he was wearing nothing but a black muscle shirt and basketball shorts [classic under-War Machine-wear]. He was barefoot), and said, “Why doesn’t everyone get a picture with one or two Avengers of their choice, and then we can gather all us heroes and get everyone a picture with *all* of us, hmm?”

“And then a group shot,” Wanda suggested. “All the kids, all the Avengers,” she nodded to Mr. Harrington and Sophie, “guests.”

“Yes!” Ned said, loudly. Wanda and Rhodey’s eyes dropped on him, and he shrunk back a little under the weight of their gaze.

Peter grinned at the back of Ned's head.

"Since we've got the OK from Mr. Leeds," Natasha said with a more Natasha-like quirk to her lips (which made Ned let out a high-pitched "eep"), "let's have everyone form a line so we can do this with some amount of organization."

The rest of Peter's teammates fell into a line in record time. Mr. Harrington awkwardly stepped in at the end.

Peter, who hadn't rushed to get in line for a photo-op with his *roommates* (which would have been weird), was close enough to catch Mr. Harrington's eye, and then raise an eyebrow at the man, very slowly.

Mr. Harrington's cheeks pinked, just a little. "I know I didn't participate in the competition, Peter, but I *was* there for the panicking and the explosions. Supervillains attacking the field trip I'm chaperoning." He groaned and rubbed at his head. "I think I'm cursed."

"Yes," Peter said tonelessly, "It's definitely you who is cursing your field trips."

Peter was actually 100% sure it was Peter's own Parker Luck, but he wasn't about to *admit* it.

Mr. Harrington grimaced and nodded. "I deserve an exciting, or at least *pleasant* memory of today. To offset the," he dropped his head into his hands, "*everything* I'm going to have to deal with when we get back. Paperwork. Principal Morita! I'm going to have to talk to *parents*!" He groaned.

"Ok," Peter said gently. "You deserve a photo."

Mr. Harrington grimaced again.

"Stop harassing your teacher," Tony said, and Peter turned to see that Tony hadn't joined the rest of the Avengers, like Peter had half thought he would, but was instead leaning against the wall, near Peter.

Peter abandoned Mr. Harrington and went to stand by Tony.

"I'm not harassing him," Peter said. "It's not *my* fault that he's cursed to have only bad field trips."

Tony cleared his throat.

"*Interesting* field trips," Peter corrected.

Tony let out a quiet chuckle.

Peter opened his mouth to say something else, but then Charles (who'd been posing against the backdrop of the *bowling alley* with Steve) stepped away, and Cindy stepped up and announced very loudly, "I want a picture with Tony Stark and Black Widow, *please*."

"My pleasure," Natasha said and then gave Tony a very pointed look.

"Fine," Tony said, pushing away from the wall with a huff. "But if I'd known someone would've wanted a photo with *me* I wouldn't have put it out as an idea," he said, looking mildly pleased, which was characteristically at odds with what he'd said. He strode over to Cindy and Natasha with confidence and much too much grace for someone who'd been in a fight not too long ago. Also he still had bits and pieces of Iron Man suit on him, and Peter wanted to know why. Most likely they had gotten crushed in place, making them impossible to remove in the usual way, and Tony hadn't

had time to force them off with the classic method of circular saw and pliers.

“Hey Peter,” a soft voice said, and Peter turned to see that Bruce had escaped the group of Avengers to come sidle up to Peter.

“Hey Bruce,” Peter said.

Bruce hummed, and Peter took a moment to realize that Bruce looked like his normal self, in soft knits, khakis, and an olive green cardigan.

“No need for the Hulk today?” Peter asked.

Bruce hummed again, and then said, “Not particularly. No one, including myself, liked the idea of letting the Hulk loose in our home. But also, it was good to have two brains working on freeing FRIDAY instead of just Tony.”

Peter nodded. He could understand that.

“Steve says you were on the tour today?”

Peter nodded.

Bruce hummed for a third time.

Peter grimaced. “I didn’t want any of my teammates to know I live here,” he explained, a little desperately. He hadn’t thought, before, that not telling the Avengers he was coming would *hurt* them, emotionally, but after his conversation with Tony, he’d realized that, yeah, it might. And he didn’t want Bruce to think that Peter didn’t trust them, or didn’t care.

But Bruce just nodded. “I understand that,” he said simply, and Peter was relieved that he sounded accepting as well.

“Uh,” Ned said, stepping up to Tao, and choosing the bowling alley as his backdrop. “I think, um, Hawkeye? And Dr. Banner?”

Clint’s whistle split the room. “Hell yeah!” he said, and loped over to Ned before giving him a huge hug and then a high-five. Ned stared at him a little starry-eyed.

Bruce sighed. “I guess that’s my cue,” he said, gave Peter a tiny smile, and meandered back towards the camera.

Natasha found him next, and propped herself against the wall next to him casually.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, looked away, looked back again. The corner of her lips quirked, but instead of mentioning the lying by omission Peter had participated in when failing to mention to the Avengers that he’d be visiting the compound as a guest, she just said, “You ok?”

Peter let out a quiet sigh and nodded.

Natasha hummed and then went quiet again.

A thought occurred to Peter and he said, “Hey, in the museum, the, you know, the pop-up one?”

“Yes,” Natasha prompted, with a curl of amusement in her voice.

“There was this knife,” Peter said. “Serrated. Very pointy. It was the only one without a plaque

next to it." He paused, giving her time to jump in, but she didn't. "Was it one of yours?"

Natasha shrugged and said, "They asked for old weapons."

But there was a hint of some deeper amusement in her voice that made Peter narrow his eyes at her in suspicion.

She laughed. "Fine. It's a bread knife from the kitchen."

Peter gaped at her. "You gave them a *bread* knife! And let them pretend it was one of *yours*?"

Natasha shrugged unrepentant. "It's not like anyone noticed the difference."

And then she was called away again.

Peter watched, half-amused, as Tao cycled through members of the Academic Decathlon team and Avengers alike. No one else approached Peter, though a few Avengers sent him smiles or waves of the hand as they passed, mingling and making small talk with Peter's classmates like they were donors at a charity gala, or politicians, instead of high schoolers.

The only one who avoided the students as they gushed over being so close to their *heroes, oh my god!* was Bucky, who stood off to the side, trying to blend in with the wall, despite his black-on-black attire clashing with the brightly colored decor in this underground bowling alley.

And for the most part it worked. Bucky was scary good at looking unassuming and unimportant even when everyone in the room *knew who he was*.

"Not your scene?" Peter asked, tongue-in-cheek, as he leaned against the wall next to Bucky.

Bucky scowled.

"Yeah," Peter agreed, "me neither."

That made Bucky roll his eyes. "They're *your* friends, Peter."

"They're my *classmates*," Peter corrected, eyeing MJ as she posed, with a genuine smile, between Natasha and Wanda.

"Some of them are your friends," Bucky said. "Her," he said, nodding to MJ, "and Ned."

Peter instinctively searched out his friend in the crowd (a habit he couldn't seem to let go, even when there was no threat nearby), and found him chatting with Vision, looking torn between being starry-eyed and completely, utterly, baffled. Vision had that effect on Peter too, sometimes, so he understood the feeling.

"Yeah," Peter said. Because what else could he do but agree? "But," he said after a pause where Bucky's eyes followed first one contingent of teenagers, and then another, "besides those two, everyone else is just a classmate. Some more friendly than others." He grimaced.

"And you didn't want them in your home," Bucky guessed.

Peter turned wide eyes on Bucky. "How'd you know?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "What else could it be? You didn't tell us you were coming, so obviously you were trying to hide your connections here. It makes sense you'd do the same with your classmates." He shrugged. "Plus, from what little I remember from my own education, I certainly

wouldn't have liked half my class tromping through *my* house."

Peter let out a breath. "Yeah," he said.

Bucky eyed Peter. "We're not upset you lied."

"I didn't *lie*," Peter said.

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Omitted then. Either way, we're not upset about it."

Peter narrowed his eyes, and finally Bucky cracked a smile, albeit a small one. "Fine, some are... less than enthused. Confused." He nodded towards Natasha where she was chatting with MJ as they walked away from Tao. "Romanoff understands. She's very private."

Peter let out a chuckle. "I'm aware."

"Barton too," Bucky said. "He understands more than he lets on. Sam respects your decisions, Rhodey would have done the same, Bruce—"

"I already talked to Bruce," Peter said.

Bucky nodded. A shallow movement of the head.

"Steve?" Peter asked, with only the smallest amount of trepidation.

Bucky's grin widened. "You might have to explain it to him, the fat head. But once you get it into his skull *why*, he'll understand. Might even take your side." He said it like it was a foregone conclusion.

"It's not that I don't *trust* you guys," Peter said.

"Hey. Peter," Bucky said, "I get that. You don't have to explain to *me* the concept of trying to lay-low by keeping your thoughts and plans to yourself. I practically perfected that maneuver."

"Hah-hah," Peter said drily. He looked around the room, caught Flash posing in a strong-man pose in front of Thor who was mimicking the movement gamely. Thor, like Clint, hadn't changed out of his armor, though he'd lost the cape somewhere along the way. "Thor?"

"Are you kidding?" Bucky asked. "That big lug? He's a softie. You know that."

Peter narrowed his eyes at Bucky. "I know. That's the problem. What if he takes it as a slight against him and he gets *sad*. I can't stay strong against Thor's puppy-dog eyes, Bucky. I can't do it."

Bucky shrugged. "But he's reasonable, so as soon as you explain why you did it he'll snap back, no problem."

Peter shrugged his assent.

Neither Peter nor Bucky bothered mentioning Vision, who didn't have, yet, a grasp on social mores and seemed neither offended nor interested in the fact that Peter had hidden from the Avengers the fact that his Academic Decathlon team had won the competition for the tour.

Vision was, meanwhile, posing with Mr. Harrington, who was grinning so wide that Peter was sure this at least made up for *most* of the fall-out the man would have to deal with over this field trip going sideways.

And then it was time for group photos. The ones where everyone was going to get a chance to pose with *all* of the Avengers. Mr. Harrington was practically beaming about the fact that he was first in line this time, if only because he was still standing with Tao and Vision from his previous photo. Bucky sauntered away from Peter without a word as the other Avengers also gathered around Mr. Harrington.

“Aww,” Yasmin said, “I wanted to go first again.”

“Tough cookies,” Sue told her.

“Everyone back in line again,” Sophie said. She’d been on the sidelines, letting the Avengers and Mr. Harrington take the lead, but now that both the Avengers *and* Mr. Harrington were occupied she stepped back into her role as guide.

Yasmin jostled for a place near the front of the line, but Sue very firmly stepped in front of her, and Ned stepped in front of *her*, and then gestured for MJ to step in front of him.

Yasmin huffed, crossed her arms, and pouted.

Sue very maturely laughed in her face, and then raised her hand to Ned for a high-five which he obligingly provided.

Peter stayed leaning against the wall, and watched as the Avengers posed, en masse, with each of his Academic Decathlon teammates. He tried, very hard, not to feel weird about it.

On the one hand, two years ago— heck *a* year ago, he’d have been just as gaga over meeting and getting a *photo* with any and/or *all* of the Avengers. Save for, maybe, Tony, who he already saw all the time. So he understood his teammates’ reactions. He felt for them. He’d been just as nervous and stutter-y and awe-struck as they were now. Even Flash, who looked like he’d died and gone to heaven, posing with a wide non-asshole smile, his shoulders pushed back, and his hands on his hips.

But, on the *other* hand, he... lived with these people? Yeah, they were the Avengers, but he’d lived with them long enough by now that being an Avenger just seemed like their occupation (just like him being Spiderman now just seemed like something he did, not something that would make him *special* or *famous*). So it was weird seeing these kids that he spent so much of his day with, day after day, five days a week, freaking out and wanting pictures with Peter’s roommates just because they all chose to put on colorful outfits and flew around saving the day. Yes, from aliens and monsters and Nazis, etc, but still...

No, Peter got it, it was just hard for him to process since he *too* was a hero, and also— they were his *roommates*.

Peter wanted to go up to each of his classmates and ask, “How would you feel if all of your classmates infiltrated your house and set up a photo-op with your parents and siblings? Huh? How would *you* feel, if all of your classmates were lined up to take a silly photo with your mom and your sister and your dog?”

Not that it was *quite* the same, but still.

But these sets of photos didn’t take as long because they didn’t have to keep calling over whichever Avenger the student wanted a picture with, since they were all already standing right there. And then Yasmin was done (last in line this time, as per Karma), and she said, “Yay! Now it’s group photo time?” She clapped her hands together excitedly.

“Not quite,” Tony said.

At the same time Steve said, “Now wait a minute.”

“I think we missed someone,” Rhodey added, eyeing Peter with too much mischief in his eyes.

“Oh, no,” Peter said. “I’m not taking a picture with all of you.”

“Why not?” Wanda asked. “Don’t you love us anymore?”

Peter grimaced.

“Go on, Peter,” MJ said. “Just let your weird superhero family get a picture with you.”

“Our favorite child,” Clint said, dramatically.

Natasha didn’t try persuading (though she would probably be better at it than most of the people in the room), she just moved with speed and precision to where Peter was, took hold of his arm, and dragged him back to the group.

“Go Natasha!” Sam said.

“You need not be so reluctant,” Thor told Peter as Natasha released Peter’s arm and moved herself to his other side. “I believe it is as much a tradition here on Midgard as it is where I come from, to immortalize the happiness one draws from one’s family through family portraits.”

“Aww,” Sally said, “they want a family picture with Peter!”

Flash scoffed, but said nothing.

And, well, Peter couldn’t exactly say no to *that* could he?

He tried to ignore the heat in his cheeks as he let himself be manhandled into place, surrounded by his, uh, family.

Tony slid into the space on Peter’s left and draped an arm of Peter’s shoulders. Steve came up to Peter’s other side, and Peter glanced at him to see him beaming at the camera with an expression that was all Steve Rogers, without even a speck of Captain America.

He could see that Rhodey was on Tony’s other side, and Natasha on Steve’s, and he felt everyone else gather behind them or on either side, but he was too focused on making his own expression look not stupid to really notice.

“Ok,” Tao said, “3, 2, 1—” he snapped a photo, and then several more without counting. When he tore his eyes from the camera’s screen his expression looked a little odd. Not *bad*, but not the neutral look he’d had on before.

“A silly one?” Vision asked.

Tao let out a chuckle and raised the camera up. “Ok,” he said, “everyone in silly poses in 3, 2—”

Panic gripped Peter. A silly face. A silly face? A silly pose?

God, he wasn’t good at this on-the-spot stuff! Not when he wasn’t wearing his mask!

Desperate to think of anything, he shot the camera a peace sign (a lá Tony Stark) and stuck his

tongue out.

Someone laughed at him, and he recognized the voice as *Ned's*. Traitor.

"Nice," Sam's voice said from somewhere behind him, and then Peter heard the sound of a high-five.

"Now the Prom pose," Rhodey said, and that at least made Peter laugh.

Peter peered around Tony to look Rhodey in the eye. "How? There's—" he did a quick head count, "twelve of us."

"Prom Train?" Tony offered, and then let himself be turned fully towards Peter so Rhodey could wrap his arms around Tony's waist.

Peter laughed again.

"Please no," he said.

"Good," Rhodey said.

"I thought you were *for* the prom pose," Clint said, laughter in his voice.

"I *was*," Rhodey said, "but that was before I got my arms around this bonehead," he cuffed the back of Tony's head with his hand. "Tony, why do you still have armor pieces on? They weren't exactly comfortable for *me*, and all I did was try to hug you, so I doubt they're any more comfortable for the person wearing them."

"Couldn't remove them," Tony said.

"Crushed?" Peter asked.

Tony shrugged.

"Tony," Steve sighed, "why didn't you *say* anything?"

Tony gestured to Peter, and then to the huddle of high schoolers. "I'm not in pain," Tony said, "just uncomfortable."

"Sure, man," Sam said, sounding just the opposite. "Whatever you say."

"As soon as they leave," Steve started, quietly, leaning over Peter's head to talk directly to Tony.

Tony scoffed, cutting him off. "As soon as they *need to leave*, we will be escorting them back to their school, in order to keep them safe. I have the jet fueled and the pilots have Midtown School of Science and Technology's GPS coordinates. And as soon as Peter's little classmates—"

"Hey!" Peter said.

Tony ignored him. "—are safe in their parents' arms," Tony continued, "then I'll come home and get DUM-E to saw this thing off my arm." He waved his free hand vaguely at the shoulder that was still wearing damaged armor.

"I will help you get that off your arm," Bruce corrected. "You're not putting DUM-E anywhere near a living human while he's wielding a circular saw."

Tony's shrug could have been agreement, but it could just as likely have been a motion to mean he'd heard, but not a promise to actually follow through.

Peter twisted around to meet Bruce's eyes and winked. Bruce gave him a thumbs up, an agreement that they'd double-team Tony into making sure none of his robots would be given the opportunity or power to damage him.

"Anyway," Tony said, "no prom pose because I'm no longer snuggly. Anyone else have any suggestions for ways we can embarrass Peter in front of his classmates or should we go in for the team-wide group photo?"

"Tony!" Peter complained.

"Group photo!" Flash yelled, because it wasn't like any of the Avengers had been speaking quietly enough for the other teens not to hear them chattering.

"Flash," Mr. Harrington warned with a weary sigh.

"One more photo with Peter," Natasha said, "a serious one, and then we can have the whole tour group in here."

"With the bowling alley as the background?" Ned suggested, not succeeding in hiding the excitement lacing his tone.

"Heck yes!" Tyler agreed.

"Why not?" Tony asked.

"Woohoo!" Tyler crowed, and then fist bumped Ned who looked equal parts surprised to be getting such a strong reaction out of Tyler, and excited that they were going with his idea.

Yasmin sighed, very loudly, but didn't bother voicing her opinion.

So the Avengers and Peter took one more picture, a serious one where Peter tried to stand straight-backed and proper looking, and then the entire class bundled back in for a group shot, including Mr. Harrington and a surprised-looking Sophie.

"You're our tour guide," MJ explained as they dragged Sophie into the group. "We all went through a traumatic event together. Which makes you our friend now."

"Oh," Sophie said, sounding like she couldn't decide on whether to be pleased she was being included, or concerned that a mass of teenagers had just insisted she was their new friend.

"We're making memories," Sally told her, "just get in here. We need to immortalize today and you were, like, here for it."

"Just go along with it," Mr. Harrington whispered to her out of the side of his mouth. "They won't take no for an answer."

Sophie shrugged and joined him.

And so they took one more photo, with everyone gathered around, grinning. And Peter felt himself relax, just a little bit more, because with Ned and MJ on either side of him, and Tony right behind him, a hand on his shoulder, he could finally accept that he was *home*. And he was safe.

Chapter End Notes

I think my professors are genuinely trying to kill me and my job is closing down due to renovations so things are *changing* irl, and I thought, well, might as well get this posted before things get even *weirder*.

Kinda banking on the existence of spring break to get me to the end of this fic. I'm so sorry it's taking me this long to write things TT

Even more parents, if you can believe it

Chapter Notes

The End! It's here!
I can't believe it took me this long but it's here now!
Bon appétit!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter rode back with the rest of his classmates on Tony's personal jet (Not the Avengers' quinjet, the one Tony owned personally, though missing the stripper poles, thank god). He didn't really need to, what with him already being *home* and everything, but he also wasn't really keen on the Academic Decathlon team being in a jet with Tony, Steve, Sam, and Natasha (the ones who'd volunteered to play protection detail for the teens) without Peter as a buffer. Or, without being there to make sure none of his classmates grilled any of the Avengers for embarrassing information on Peter. Or vice versa.

Also, he kinda felt bad for Mr. Harrington, and he imagined Mr. Harrington would get into *more* trouble with principal Morita if he returned missing a student, even if Mr. Harrington and Tony both explained that Peter didn't need to go back to the school just to go home, because he was *already* home.

Peter needn't have worried, at least not about the first issue. Almost as soon as the teens were loaded into the jet and had sat down, most of them started nodding off, and those not taking the opportunity to get in a post-trauma power nap, were whispering amongst themselves or playing on their phones, listening to music, etc. Even Ned nodded off, despite the fact that he was sitting right next to Sam. MJ sat with Natasha, making light conversation as she sketched, and Peter was happy to hear that most of their conversation revolved around travel and different cultures around the world (mostly of places Natasha had visited, though half the time she wouldn't say *why* she'd been in Uzbekistan or Kiribati or Botswana or wherever), and hardly touched on Peter at all.

Thank God.

Steve took the empty seat next to Tony. Tony happened to be sitting at one of the only tables, across from Peter, who'd been switching between playing a puzzle game on his phone and eavesdropping, mostly between MJ and Natasha, but also listening in to any of his other teammate's conversations if he happened to hear his name mentioned.

This put Steve right across from Peter, and Peter focused on him right away, drawing his attention away from Yasmin and Charles, who were both trying to come up with increasingly stupid ideas as for why Peter's aunt would send him to live with the Avengers. They were currently torn between the idea that Peter's aunt was a supervillain and she'd given Peter to the Avengers as a permanent hostage to show that she would try to reform, and the idea that Peter wasn't actually a teenager, and was, in fact, a very human-like android Tony had built, and Peter had never *had* an aunt, it had all been a cover for the fact that Tony Stark was creating intelligent humanoid life.

Peter would have to remind himself to tell Tony about those later. The man could do with a good laugh.

Peter eyed Steve, who was himself eyeing Peter very seriously.

Peter grimaced. "Time for the talk?"

That jolted Tony away from his phone just a little. He raised his eyes first to Peter, and then turned his gaze to what Peter was looking at (Steve), and then nodded marginally, said, "Steve's turn, then," and fell back into his phone.

Steve turned to blink at Tony, and then turned back to Peter, with a slightly less serious, slightly more confused expression on his face.

"My turn?" Steve asked.

Peter nodded. "I assumed you were here to interrogate me about why I didn't tell anyone I was coming on a field trip to the compound?"

Steve grimaced, just a little. "Well, I don't know if I'd use the word 'interrogate.'"

"That just means yes," Peter said.

Steve thought a moment and then shrugged. "Ok, yes, I'd like to know."

"Then it *is* your turn," Peter said. "Tony's already had his turn, Bucky and Bruce talked to me about it. Now it's your turn."

Steve shifted in his seat. "Well, if everyone else..." he started, and then trailed off awkwardly, looking suddenly a lot less sure about having this conversation.

Peter rolled his eyes. "It's not that I don't *trust* you guys," Peter said.

"Then why?" Steve said. "I'm not upset, I just don't understand."

"You don't sound not upset," Peter said.

It was Steve's turn to roll his eyes. "Fine, I'm *trying to be* not upset. But it, you know Peter, it kind of *does* seem like you didn't trust us. Not," he hurried to say, "that you're obligated to trust us, but you have to admit, it does seem at least a little like you *don't* trust us."

Peter bit his lip. "Yeah, I'm starting to get that. I didn't really," he sighed, "I don't think I really thought about what it would look like from your end? Like, I really just wanted no one to know I was part of this field trip."

"Sure," Steve said, like he didn't really believe Peter at all. "Why?"

Peter looked up. He focused on the ceiling lights above the table, the tiny buttons with symbols that meant things like turn up the air flow or turn on the light or fasten seat belts, but looked like arcane imagery representing the whirlpools of time, and the sun stretched down into a staff, and a seat belt.

"You know how Tony flies me to school?" Peter said, and only then did he lower his eyes from the light and the symbols above his head and back to Steve.

"Yes," Steve said. "Rhodey does as well sometimes."

"And Thor, and once, Wanda," Peter agreed. "And you know how I make sure he knows that *no one can see me* with Iron Man?"

Steve nodded, and then jumped ahead, because for all that he was brawn, people sometimes forgot he was brain as well. “So, this... lying... had to do with you not wanting anyone at school to know that you know... us.”

Peter nodded.

Steve tilted his head to the side like he was considering that. “But if you’d *told* us,” he said, “we would have known not to act familiar with you in front of your classmates.”

Peter fidgeted.

“That’s what *I* said,” Tony said, proving once again that he was a master of multitasking as he’d apparently been eavesdropping *while* he typed code into his StarkPhone’s keyboard.

Steve looked at Tony and then back at Peter.

“And I stand with the knowledge that if everyone knew I was coming, I could not guarantee someone wouldn’t accidentally slip and be just a *tad* too familiar, or come and harass me, thinking they were being slick, when really they wouldn’t be treating any other teen the same.”

“Someone...” Steve prompted.

“Someone like cough, Clint, cough,” Peter said, “or cough, cough, Wanda. Or Thor, cough-cough-cough.”

“You know you’re not supposed to say the *word* ‘cough,’ right?” Tony asked.

“They wouldn’t *mean* to do anything,” Peter continued, ignoring Tony, “but you can’t tell me they aren’t the type to try to do something, tease me or something, *subtly*. And that could very, *very* easily backfire.”

Steve tilted his head first one way, and then the other. “I will admit that that is a... possibility,” Steve said. And then he sighed. “But it would have backfired—”

“Because of the surprise meet-and-greet,” Peter said with a sigh of his own, “yeah, Tony told me.”

“Right,” Steve said. And then, after a pause, “You really have already had this conversation.”

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, not moving his eyes from his phone screen.

Peter stuck his tongue out at the man.

He then focused back on Steve. “It’s just, it’s kind of a big deal, you know? That I live with you guys, and I really *don’t* want people to think I’m a big deal. I want everyone at school to continue thinking I’m just Peter Parker, especially since—”

But no, Peter had to remind himself, they didn’t know about his little Spider issue either.

It occurred to him very suddenly, that from the outside, no matter the angle, it was looking more and more like maybe he *didn’t* trust them. If he *did* trust them... and he *did*. He absolutely did trust every single one of them. Well then, why hadn’t it ever occurred to him to tell them he was Spiderman? Tony knew, and Happy knew, May, Ned, and MJ knew. Even Pepper knew. He trusted Steve and the rest of the Avengers as much as he trusted Pepper and Happy *at a minimum*.

He should... he should tell them.

He'd tell them this.

Because no matter how much he'd kinda fucked up this field trip, this whole hiding-things fiasco, he really wanted them to know that he *did*. He did trust them.

He was going to tell them he was Spiderman.

He met Steve's eyes with a fierce and confident grin, and was met with a hesitant smile and an, "Especially since, what?" from the man, who was obviously not a mind reader and was therefore still thinking about the field trip fiasco.

Peter blinked at him, opened his mouth to reveal to Steve that he was Spiderman, and then remembered that he was on a private jet with his entire decathlon team, and yeah, they might have been cowed into submission by Tony not to reveal that Peter was living with the Avengers, but there was no way they'd be silent if they heard that Peter was Spiderman.

That little revelation was going to have to wait. And maybe he should mention his decision to Tony, first? Run it by him a little, before making any *more* spur-of-the-moment decisions.

Peter bit his tongue, sighed, and tried to send his mind back to the thoughts it had been processing three minutes ago before the idea that he should reveal his alter ego to the Avengers filtered into his fool head.

"Especially since," Peter started slowly, "uh, they now all believe I have an internship at Stark Industries?"

Steve's head tipped to the side, just a little. "Was that something they didn't believe before?" His tone was cool, neutral, but Peter heard the steel beneath it.

"I'm a high school student working with the richest man in the country, face-to-face, three-to-five evenings a week. I'm honestly surprised I didn't have more classmates who thought I was fibbing for clout."

Tony made a noise that sounded more like, "harrumph" than any word Peter had ever heard, and then said, "I *still* have half a mind to show that Flash boy a piece of my mind."

"Physical violence is not the answer," Peter said.

Steve, who used physical violence as the solution to any number of problems on a daily basis, and as a career, but who intrinsically wanted the world to be a more peaceful place, made a torn expression and then shrugged.

"Who said anything about *physical* violence," Tony muttered.

"Please do not psychologically torment my classmates," Peter said. "Haven't they gone through enough today?"

"Sure," Tony said, "I'll just wait till he's healed from today and—"

Steve thankfully cut him off with a lighthearted slap to the arm.

Any further plans Tony could make involving somehow verbally sparring with a teenager were thankfully put on hold as an announcement was made over the intercom to warn everyone that the jet was descending, and to put on their seatbelts.

Peter put on his seatbelt.

The jet, being a jet, had to land in the football field for the room alone, but Principal Morita was waiting on the grass below as the steps descended from the jet, as were the parents of all the Academic Decathlon members besides Peter.

Peter's parent was currently globe-trotting and would need to be informed of today's debacle with all possible haste. Otherwise, when she *did* eventually find out, she would probably riot.

Mr. Harrington descended first (the sacrifice he was making would never be forgotten), and everyone on the jet, and on the football field (and probably in the entire state of New York) heard Principal Morita's aggrieved, "Mr. Harrington! What is going on!?"

"Well," Mr. Harrington started, sounding much quieter and meeker than the principal.

But he never got any further, because right behind Mr. Harrington was Tony.

"Principal Morita," Tony said, in his best glad-handing tone, "so good to meet you in person. I'm glad you were able to get all the parents out here on such short notice."

"Of course we'd come," a parent spoke up. "They said our babies were attacked by a *supervillain*."

"Mooom!" Yasmin complained as the students started to trickle off the jet as well. "We're not babies. And we weren't attacked."

"Technically," Tony said to the amassed parents and teachers, "it wasn't a *super*-villain. Just a normal, run-of-the-mill face-stealing, bomb-toting baddie."

"Not helping, Tony," Natasha said as she exited the plane.

Tony shrugged.

It didn't take long for everyone to exit the vehicle, and then most of the parents were busy with greeting their children and demanding they explain what *exactly* happened during the field trip. In detail.

Hopefully they'd all remember to leave Peter's housing situation out of it.

Peter stepped up between Tony and Natasha, facing a ruddy-faced Principal Morita and a pale Mr. Harrington.

(Steve and Sam were making the rounds among the parents, introducing themselves, and trying to create a sense of safety amongst the students).

"Mr. Stark," Principal Morita said, like he'd only just barely held himself back from saying something much more derogatory instead, "I *demand an explanation*. I understand," he pinched the bridge of his nose, "to a *degree*, that you could not predict what happened at your facility, and that you took care of the problem as quickly as you Avengers could, but the fact that you did not return my students to safety *immediately* afterward, is untenable."

"I thought I explained myself perfectly well over the phone," Tony said, unbothered.

"If by 'explained' you mean 'shot down any disagreements' then yes," Principal Morita bit out.

"Oh good," Tony said, "then we're on the same page."

Mr. Morita fumed.

“He means well,” Natasha said to the principal, in a tone that was meant to sound sympathetic, but which sounded, to anyone who knew Natasha, like she was laughing at him.

“Tony,” Peter said quietly, trying to draw the man’s attention, but somehow drew the attention of not just Tony but Mr. Morita, Mr. Harrington, and Natasha as well. He ducked his head a little at being under his Principal’s gaze in less-than-perfect circumstances, but continued talking anyway. “He’s just concerned,” he said. When all Tony did was blink at him, Peter tried a different tactic. “Imagine if I’d gone on a field trip with my Decathlon team to the Baxter building, and the building had gotten attacked, and after the problem had been dealt with, instead of sending us back to school, Reed Richards had given us a tour of his bowling alley and then mocked my principal.”

Tony straightened up. “I am *not* like Reed Richards,” he said, enraged. “Of course you were safe at the compound. I wouldn’t trust Richards to iron his own *socks*.”

Peter rolled his eyes.

Natasha made a humming noise that was her PR-approved way of cackling. “A rich scientist who lives in a building with other supers?” she asked. “I don’t know, I can see the resemblance.”

It was Tony’s turn to fume.

Peter turned to Mr. Morita. “We’re sorry,” he said, “Tony just wanted to make sure our last memories of the day weren’t of panic and fear for our lives. It was very nice, really.”

Mr. Morita blinked down at Peter. He lost his angry expression when looking at Peter, which was, Peter had to admit, a relief. “Parker, right?”

Peter nodded.

“You’re a very smart young man,” the Principal said.

“Damn skippy he is,” Tony said proudly.

Mr. Morita frowned at Tony and then back down at Peter. “And you speak for Mr. Stark because...”

“I work for him,” Peter said, which was *a* truth, if not necessarily the one Principal Morita was asking for.

“Uh-huh,” Mr. Morita said.

Natasha did that non-laughing laugh-hum thing again.

“He’s my intern,” Tony said with a sigh. “Has been my intern for years. Hell, Teach, if I knew the kid’s class, or decathlon team, or whatever wanted a tour of any of my buildings I would have made it happen like that.” He snapped his fingers. “But, between you and me,” he leaned forward a little to imitate familiarity, making the crushed armor at his shoulder groan uncomfortably, “he has an issue with *asking* for things.”

“I do *not*,” Peter said hotly. “I just— it wouldn’t have been *fair*!”

Tony sighed, fondly, and then gestured to Peter as if to say, *See?*

“We’re off topic,” Mr. Morita said, running a hand down his face. “What you did today was

unacceptable, Mr. Stark. And you, Roger,” he said, turning on Mr. Harrington, but Tony cut him off.

“Oh give him a break, Morita,” he said. “I may have talked you into it over the phone, but at the time you *did* agree with me, right?”

It looked like Mr. Morita had just bitten into a lemon, but he nodded.

“And really,” Tony said, “if you think about it, I actually got everyone here *quicker* than if they’d left when we called you. If, after that call, everyone had piled back into that bus the kids would still be on the road. With my jet we could afford a little detour, couldn’t we?”

Mr. Morita grimaced. “I don’t like it. These kids’ safety is my first concern at all times.”

“And they were safe,” Tony said. “Even when the Chameleon was attacking, they were never, not for even a second, in any danger at all. In fact, besides the initial scare, if I remember correctly, they spent most of the attack watching a movie in a veritable bunker of safety.”

“Pirates of the Caribbean,” Peter said. “We didn’t get to finish it.”

“Of course,” Natasha said, “that would be your complaint.”

Peter frowned at her because *no*, that hadn’t been a *complaint*. Vision was going to make them all watch it again soon enough anyway. But, hell, it wasn’t like Peter could *say* that in front of his *Principal*. Not without having to explain himself, which he was loath to do.

Mr. Morita’s anger toned down several notches. “Ok,” he said, “but I’m not answering for the decisions either of you made today,” he swung his gaze between Tony and Mr. Harrington, “and I can guarantee that the parents are *not* going to be happy.”

“They seem happy enough to me,” Tony said mildly.

Mr. Morita and Mr. Harrington both swung their heads around to find Steve and Sam holding court, surrounded by all of the parents and students, answering questions and posing for the occasional photo.

Mr. Morita sighed. “Is it *always* that simple for you lot?” he asked, sounding suddenly tired. “You just whip out Captain America and the problem disappears?”

“It’s not quite that simple,” Natasha said. “Sure, Steve’s existence helps a lot, but I know a few of the parents who look quite content at the moment will change their tune sooner or later, and Tony here will have to deal with the fall out from that.”

“Not me personally,” Tony said, “I hire people to deal with that sort of thing for me.”

“But yes,” Natasha said, “if you want instant gratification concerning the American public’s anger and upset, putting Steve in front of them will sort it out quickly and thoroughly.”

Mr. Morita narrowed his eyes slightly. “Could I... borrow him?”

Tony hummed. “We’ll have to ask Mr. Red-White-and-Blue himself, but if it’ll make you stop yelling at us, I’m sure something can be arranged.”

“I assume you want him for something work related,” Natasha said, “and not for any personal reasons.”

“Kinky,” Tony said, because he was an ass.

“Tony!” Peter exclaimed.

Mr. Morita glared at Tony.

“Please, Principal Morita,” Peter said, “ignore him. He needs medical attention and—”

“A gag, probably,” Natasha said.

Tony opened his mouth, and Peter slapped his hand over it.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Parker,” Mr. Morita said, “I’d never let my judgment of you be colored by the fact that you have an internship with such an uncouth and aggravating man.”

“Aggravating!” Tony said. “I understand uncouth, but aggravating?”

“Thank you,” Peter said.

He shuffled. He didn’t really want to hear whatever other thing Tony and Mr. Morita were going to snap at each other. He looked at Natasha, who looked pleased enough at watching the trash can fire that was the conversation between Peter’s principal and Peter’s guardian-slash-employer. He hoped leaving her with them was a good plan, and wouldn’t result in more aggravation.

“I’m going to go return this to Ned,” Peter said, plucking at his neon hoodie. “I’ll be right back.” And then scurried off before anyone could say anything.

He found Ned boxed in by his moms standing by MJ, who was taking her father’s helicopter parenting with aplomb.

“Peter!” Ned said happily as Peter approached.

“Hey Ned,” Peter said, he nodded to each of his moms. “Mrs and Mrs Leeds.”

“Peter,” Mrs. Leeds said, “how many times have I said this? Please call me Jeanie.”

“Yes, Peter,” Mrs. Leeds said, “you’re over at our house enough. Say it with me, Peter. April Leeds.”

Peter grimaced. “Uh, hi Mrs. Jeanie. Mrs. April.”

Ned snickered into his hands.

Mrs. Leeds sighed. “Alright, Peter. I guess that’s better than nothing.”

“Don’t call me Mrs. Jeanie,” Mrs. Leeds said in a gruff voice. “That was my mother’s name. Please, call me Jeanie.”

“Ugh,” Ned complained. “Mom jokes.”

“Don’t you mom-joke me, young man,” Mrs. Jeanie said, and descended to give Ned a huge bear-hug.

“Mooom!” Ned complained.

“Wow, Leeds,” MJ said, not moving away from the protective arm of her father, “real mature.”

“Michelle,” Mr. Jones chided lightly.

MJ turned to stick her tongue out at her father and he rolled his eyes at her fondly.

Peter glanced over his shoulder to find that the crowd surrounding Steve and Sam (which he was now a part of) had decreased in size quite a bit as parents and students started to leave, and that past the crowd, Tony and Mr. Morita hadn’t actually started a fist-fight yet, but by Natasha’s amused posture, it wouldn’t be too long now before someone started *something*.

“I can’t stick around,” Peter said to MJ and Ned, and to their parents. “I just wanted to return your hoodie before you head out.”

“I thought I recognized that,” Mrs. April said.

“It’s very... bright,” Mr. Jones offered.

Mrs. Jeanie laughed.

Peter pulled the oversized garment off of himself, straightening the shirt he was wearing beneath it as he did so, and handed the bundled-up jacket off to Ned.

Ned took it and tucked it under his arm.

“Aww,” MJ said in mock complaint. “Is that it? I thought you were really going to strip, there, Parker.”

“Michelle!” Mr. Jones hissed, sounding slightly more scandalized.

Peter just rolled his eyes.

Mrs Jeanie looked around the slowly emptying field. “Are you still waiting for your Aunt, Peter?”

“Uhhh,” Peter said, awkwardly.

Ned ruffled the back of his head and told Peter, “I uh, never mentioned it to them?”

“Mentioned what?” Mrs. April said.

Peter bit his lip and then said, “Um, Mrs. Leeds—”

Mrs. Leeds cleared her throat.

“Sorry, Mrs. April?” Peter corrected himself. “My Aunt’s on a, um, vacation?”

“Oh!” Mrs. April said. “That’s nice. But who have you been staying with?”

MJ laughed.

“Uh,” Peter said, and then very, very awkwardly pointed behind him.”

Mrs Jeanie narrowed her eyes. “Are you... Peter, are you pointing at Captain America?”

Peter looked over his shoulder, and yes, his aim had been a little off. Still technically true, though.

“Yes,” Peter said.

Mrs Jeanie’s eyebrows met her hairline.

“How?” Mrs. April demanded.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Mr. Jones said.

“Not joking,” Peter said. “I, uh, Ned told you I intern at Stark Industries?”

The Mrs. Leeds nodded.

“So, I more specifically intern for Tony, uh, Stark, himself. And when Aunt May won a trip abroad, we thought we’d ask Tony if I could stay with him while she was gone.”

“You thought you’d ask your employer?” Mrs. April asked.

“And he said *yes*?” Mr. Jones demanded.

“Peter,” Mrs. Jeanie said, “you know you could have stayed with us for a few weeks, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Peter said, though to be honest, he hadn’t even considered staying with the Leedses. Tony had just been the first person May and Peter had thought of, and he’d said yes, so... “But, we didn’t really want to put you out? And, it would have been for more than a few weeks.”

“Uh huh,” Mrs. Jeanie said drily.

“How long have you been living with Iron Man and Captain America?” Mrs. April asked.

“And *all* of the Avengers,” Ned added unhelpfully.

“Since,” Peter said slowly, “the beginning of the school year?”

“What?” Mr. Jones asked, agog. His eyes turned to the heroes standing some ways behind Peter. “You’ve been *living* with them?”

Peter shrugged.

“How did that even *happen*?” Mrs. Jeanie asked.

Peter was getting kind of tired of everyone asking that. “I worked for Tony, and when I needed a place to stay my Aunt and I thought of him, asked him, and he said yes.”

“Tony Stark is housing one of his interns for a whole school year,” Mrs. Jeanie said like she couldn’t quite believe it.

“Yeah,” Peter said decisively.

Jeanie and April both looked at him.

“Alright,” Mrs. April said. “I may try and get your Aunt to explain herself when she returns home but,” she shrugged.

“Sure,” Peter said.

“Peter!” Tony’s voice called out, and Peter turned to see that the only other people left in the field were Mr. Harrington, Principal Morita, Natasha, Steve, Sam, and Tony.

“Coming!” he called back, and then turned back around to face Ned and MJ and their respective parents. “Sorry,” he said, “I’ve got to go.” He shrugged and then smirked a little mischievously.

“Parents, amirite?”

“Hah,” MJ said. “Next time I see Stark I’m telling him you called him your *parent*.”

Peter stuck his tongue out at her, and she grinned.

“See you Monday?” Ned asked.

Peter nodded.

“Peter!” It was Sam this time. “We’re going home!”

Peter sighed.

“Oh,” MJ said in faux surprise. “I thought you just meant Stark when you said ‘parents’ but you meant the whole lot of them, didn’t you?”

Peter scowled as Ned howled in laughter.

“Peter!” Natasha snapped warningly.

“I’m *coming*!” Peter called back. In his normal voice he said to the Leedses and the Joneses, “Sorry but I’ve got to jet!”

“Nice pun,” Ned commended.

Peter hadn’t meant to pun, but smiled now as he got... his own joke, apparently.

“Nice seeing you again Mrs. Leeds and Mrs. Leeds,” he turned his head, “Mr. Jones. See you on Monday Ned, MJ.”

“Bye loser,” MJ said with a soft smile and a little wave.

“Yeah,” Ned said, waving with more vigor. “Bye loser!”

Peter rolled his eyes, but gave his own wave and then jogged back to the little group next to the jet’s stairs that consisted of four roommates/superheroes and two school teachers.

(One of Peter’s least favorite combinations)

“Much better,” Natasha said as he skidded to a stop, once again between her and Tony. She plucked at the sleeve of the t-shirt he’d had on beneath Ned’s hoodie. It read in large font “You Matter,” and then in smaller font, “Unless you Multiply Yourself by the Speed of Light Squared... Then You Energy.”

Tony had picked it up for him at a conference in Topeka a few months previous and it was his *current* favorite novelty science t-shirt.

Peter looked down at himself. “What, you don’t think my complexion matches neon green?”

“No one’s complexion matches neon green,” Sam said. “It’s a crime against humanity. Also, I can’t believe I didn’t even see you in the gym! Peter! How did I not even *notice it was you*!”

“That’s the power of the neon green hoodie,” Peter said. “It can disguise *anybody*. It’s just that powerful.”

"I'll make a note to pick up one myself," Steve said. "Now, I think it's time to get back home." He looked at Tony. "Maybe help your mentor out of his suit."

"Not the whole thing," Tony complained. "It's just a few parts."

"They're stuck on you, Tony," Steve said tiredly. "And you probably need medical."

"I'm fine," Tony insisted.

Steve looked at Peter.

Why was this always Peter's job?

"Oh good," Peter said, "you finally got that medical degree!"

"Uh," Tony said.

Peter raised his eyebrows in faux surprise. "Wait, you *didn't* get a medical degree? Then don't you think a medical professional should take a look at you after we get the pieces of the suit off of you? What if they caused you some damage?"

"I'm fine," Tony insisted.

"I'm sure," Peter said, "but don't you think you should at least get it checked out? What if you get an infection? Again?"

Tony sighed. "Fine. But they're just going to tell me I'm fine."

"Then it'll be a quick trip," Peter said. "No loss there."

Tony narrowed his eyes at Peter. "I see what you're doing."

"I'm sure you do," Peter said, "and you're going to let me get away with it. Otherwise, if May finds out that you're not taking care of yourself..."

"You wouldn't sic your aunt on me!" Tony said, sounding a little unsure.

Peter raised an eyebrow.

"Fine," Tony said.

"Good," Peter said.

"Finally," Steve said.

"This happens every time," Natasha told Mr. Morita and Mr. Harrington.

"I can believe it," Mr. Morita said, glaring at Tony.

"Hey," Peter said, "did you get the Steve thing worked out?"

"What Steve thing?" Steve asked.

Peter glanced at Steve, and then at Tony, and finally at Principal Morita who looked, if anything, a little embarrassed.

"Yeah," Peter said, "Principal Morita saw how well you handled those parents and wondered if he

could borrow you for something. I figured, dealing with the school board or something.”

“That... was exactly it, actually,” Mr. Morita said. “We’re having some funding issues, and it’d help if I could have someone next to me who the board wouldn’t want to... well... disappoint.”

“If you wanted funding,” Tony started, “why didn’t you just *say* so?” he reached into his pocket to pull out a wallet.

“Wait,” Steve said, “Morita?”

Mr. Morita shifted his gaze a little. “Uh, yeah.”

“I thought you looked familiar,” Steve said, “but didn’t want to say anything in case I was wrong. Do you happen to be related to Jim Morita?”

“Grandpa Jim,” Mr. Morita confirmed.

Steve smiled, wider than he usually showed to strangers. “I fought with him in the war. He was in the Howling Commandos with me and Bucky.”

“I know,” Mr. Morita said awkwardly, but at least returned Steve’s smile.

“Just let me know when and where to show up,” Steve told him. “I can even wear the suit, if you want. Anything for a relative of Jim’s.”

Mr. Morita’s smile stayed awkward, but he nodded. “Thanks.”

“Let’s go,” Natasha said, nodded to Mr. Harrington and Mr. Morita, and boarded the jet.

“Bye Mr. Morita,” Peter said, as Tony followed Natasha, and Sam followed Tony. “Bye Mr. Harrington.”

“Bye, Peter,” Mr. Harrington, “see you Monday.”

“See you Monday,” Peter agreed.

“Don’t forget to study for Decathlon finals!”

Peter sighed, “Yes, Mr. Harrington.” And then he escaped into the jet, Steve not that far after him.

“Well, that was nice,” Natasha said mildly, as she strapped herself into an empty seat across from Tony.

“Which part?” Sam asked. “The Chameleon? Meeting Peter’s class? Being interrogated by a high school principal?”

“Yes,” Natasha agreed, baring her teeth.

“What’s with high school principals?” Tony asked. “I’ve been out of school for *decades* and yet I still can’t help but feel like a rebellious teenager standing in front of one.”

“Weren’t you, like, twelve when you graduated high school?” Sam asked.

“Fourteen,” Natasha corrected.

“Natasha, please,” Tony said, “what have we said about memorizing our personal history and

breaking it out during casual conversation?”

Natasha turned wide, guileless eyes on him and shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hah,” Tony said.

“Let’s just go,” Steve said. “I could do with some dinner. And *somebody*,” he nodded at Tony, “needs to go to the infirmary.”

“Boo,” Tony said.

“I’m on it,” Peter said.

“Thank you, Peter,” Steve said.

“Everyone always gangs up on me,” Tony complained.

“It’s one of our many talents,” Natasha said, and then condescendingly patted Tony’s shoulder at the jet started its take-off procedures.

“Practice makes perfect,” Peter agreed.

Sam went in for a high-five that Peter returned with alacrity.

Tony just scoffed, and pulled his phone back out to play with while he pretended to ignore them.

True to his word, Tao sent the photos he’d taken during the tour to Tony and Pepper no more than thirty-six hours after he left the compound. Included weren’t just the pictures from the end of the day, but pictures of the tour as well. Once again Peter was made aware of the fact that his plan to never tell the Avengers he was coming to the compound nor retroactively make them aware of his being there, was foolish.

He was in so many of the photos.

He hadn’t even realized Tao had had his camera pointed at Peter’s face, but when Tony called him over to his computer in the lab to look through the photos he’d just been emailed, Peter could see that he was *everywhere*. There he was in the pop-up museum making faces at Ned and MJ, there he was, turning to talk to his friends in the gym, there he was eating his lunch, cross-legged in the Dying Room.

“Are you going to send these all to Mr. Harrington?” Peter asked as he watched the screen flip through the photos, prompted by Tony’s hand swiping through the air. “Or are you going to send them to each student?”

Tony shrugged. “I’ll let Pepper decide what’s best.”

When he got to the photos in the bowling alley his swiping sped up.

“Can I get a copy of all these?” Peter asked.

“Sure,” Tony said. “Hard copy? Digital? Scrapbook?”

“Digital’s fine,” Peter said as Tony swiped past a picture of Flash with Thor.

“Scrapbook it is,” Tony said.

“Ha ha,” Peter said, “You’re hilarious.”

Tony turned from the screen just long enough to grin at him.

Finally they got to the photos Peter had taken with the Avengers, and Tony stopped.

It was... it was a nice photo.

Peter felt his lips pull up into a smile without his conscious decision.

He was in the center of the photo, wearing Ned’s (truly horrid) lurid green hoodie, and absolutely beaming.

He didn’t remember beaming like that when Tao was taking the photo, but he must have been.

Tony was on his one side, arm slung around Peter’s shoulder, and Rhodey was beside him. Steve was on Peter’s other side, Natasha next to him, and Clint next to her. Bucky, Sam, and Bruce were standing behind Steve, Peter, and Tony, and Bucky was giving Peter bunny years with this metal hand. Thor was behind Clint and Natasha, his arms raised, his hammer held aloft, and Wanda and Vision were floating behind Bucky and Sam. And all of them... all of them were grinning. They all looked tired and way too casual, dressed in a mix of PJs, sweats, casual clothes and dirty uniforms, but not a single one of them looked anything less than happy.

None of them had looked nearly this happy in the other photos Tao had taken.

“Hmmm,” Tony said. “I think I like this one. I’m sending it to your aunt.”

“Tony!” Peter complained.

“And I’m having this blown up, printed, and framed. I’m thinking thirty by forty, right over the tv in the living room. So we can all see your face whenever we sit down to movie night.”

“Tony!” Peter said again. He wasn’t sure why. Complaining about Tony to Tony never helped anything.

“You’re right,” Tony said. “It’d make a better wall mural anyway.”

Peter scoffed, and when he didn’t say anything Tony turned to him with a grin.

“You’ve got to admit it looks good though.”

“Yeah,” Peter said softly, and then shaking off the pleased, sentimental mood he’d fallen into, said, “They all look good, really. It’s a shame that Joel was actually the Chameleon during the tour. The photos would have done well with whatever article he was supposed to have written.”

“Actually,” Tony said, “we talked Tao into trying to write the piece himself.”

Peter looked at Tony with surprise. “And he’s going to do it?”

Tony shrugged. “He said he’d try. There won’t be any repercussions if he can’t do it, but hey, we thought it was worth a try. He does work with journalists, and he was there.” Tony shrugged.

“Plus, with the whole shitshow with the Chameleon, people will probably read it even if the

writing's crap. But, I'm betting Tao is going to do a pretty good job."

Peter nodded and then laughed. "He's going to *have* to leave something out," he said. "Too much happened to get it all."

"He'll probably gloss over watching a Disney movie in a sixteen-year-old's bedroom with a hoard of teenagers," Tony said.

"Thank goodness," Peter said. "Still, I'm kind of excited to see his take on the— the everything."

"You just want to see your picture in *vogue*," Tony teased.

"It's not even *vogue* though," Peter said. "Or, was it? I can't remember what magazine, newspaper, thing Pepper said she chose."

Tony shrugged. "They'll send us an issue. We'll figure it out then."

Peter hummed, and then reached past Tony to swipe at the image on the screen. It merely turned to the next picture, one of Peter and the Avengers making silly faces, the one where Peter had stuck out his tongue and given the camera the peace sign. Beside him, Tony was making an identical face, also flashing a peace sign.

Which explained at least why Ned had *laughed* at him. (Still a traitor.)

"I'm thinking," Peter said quietly, "of telling everyone that I'm, you know..."

"An arachnid?" Tony offered, even though they were alone in the lab.

Peter nodded.

Tony turned his chair fully to face Peter and then moved back slightly so he could see all of Peter at once. "What made you decide that?"

Peter shrugged and looked down at his feet. "I don't know." His eyes slid up, to the photo on Tony's monitor. "Just, remember when Steve was talking to me on the plane?"

"About you omitting that you were coming on the field trip," Tony said, "yeah, I remember. I remember you and I having that same conversation earlier in the day as well."

Peter waved that away with a motion of his hand. "I know. But with Steve, he was saying, he was explaining about how it kinda sorta seemed like I don't *trust* them. You. All of you."

"Still sounds exactly the same as the conversation you and I had," Tony said.

Peter groaned. "Yeah, to a point. But when he was talking, I was thinking that *of course* I trust all of you. Of course I do. Only, in this instance it *kinda* didn't look like I did. And I realized that there was another instance where it seems like I don't trust them."

"Ah," Tony said.

"Yeah," Peter said. "And it's not like I'm keeping being Spiderman from them because I don't *trust* them. I trust them."

"I know you do," Tony said, and put a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"But it doesn't look like it, when you look at it, and it doesn't *feel* like it, when you think about it,"

Peter said, making perhaps less sense than he'd intended.

"You know they wouldn't judge you for that, right?" Tony asked. "It's a different situation. Keeping your identity as a hero a secret is different than not telling your roommates that your class is touring your home."

"Not my whole class," Peter said, "just my Academic Decathlon team."

"Semantics," Tony said.

"And yes," Peter said, "I know. But it's not— look." he let out a sigh. "I'm not choosing to tell them now because I think they'll be upset with me, or tell me I don't trust them, when they do eventually find out. I want to tell them because, well, because I *do* trust them, and I— Or, yeah. That's kind of it. I just— I trust them."

Tony smiled at Peter. "Sounds like a good reason to me."

Peter nodded, not even trying to keep his bubbly smile off his face.

Tony checked his watch. "Want to go now? Most everyone should be in the living room."

The thought of going, right now, and admitting to everyone that he was Spiderman made his heart pick up speed.

"Uh," he said, and Tony grinned at him.

"Need some more time?" Tony asked.

"Yes, definitely," Peter agreed. "And I want to tell Aunt May and get her advice, and you know, tell her about the field trip too..."

"You haven't told her about that yet?" Tony asked.

Peter shook his head jerkily. "Not really sure how."

"There's not a *wrong* way of telling someone something like that," Tony said. And then he frowned. "Or well, there probably is, if sitcoms have taught me anything. But as long as you don't fold in any lies about having an affair or admit you actually have an evil twin you should be fine. Just tell her the truth, and don't try so hard to protect her feelings or her peace of mind that you end up hurting her or you in the long run."

Peter bit his lip.

"You'll be *fine*," Tony said. "But really, the longer you wait the harder it's going to be."

"You're probably right," Peter said.

"I *am* right," Tony said, "I'm always right."

Peter fidgeted.

"You want to go tell her now?" Tony asked.

"I should," Peter said.

"Well then, off you go," Tony said, and made a shooing motion with his hand.

Released, Peter started off towards the door to the lab and then stopped part way. “Don’t forget to send me those pictures,” he said.

“Yeah yeah,” Tony said, “I’ll make a scrapbook like I promised.”

“Digital copies, Tony,” Peter said, and then made it almost to the door before turning back again. This time he didn’t say anything right away.

“You want me to come with you to talk to May,” Tony said.

Peter released a sigh. “Is that stupid?”

“No,” Tony said. “I mean, your aunt can be scary. She scares me on a regular basis. But, once you explain what happened, and you answer her questions, I’m sure she’ll be fine. And she might even give you good advice on admitting your Arachni-Identity to everybody.”

“You’re right,” Peter said, and then didn’t move. “It’ll be fine,” he said.

Tony rose from his seat, cracked his back, and started towards Peter and the door.

“You’ll come help anyway?” Peter asked, slightly surprised. He shouldn’t need help talking to his aunt (though she was going to scream so much— oh was she ever going to scream). He knew she was on his side, and for any yelling she might do, it’d always be on his behalf, and she’d always help him with whatever he asked. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t nervous just thinking about trying to explain it all to her over a poor skype connection.

(If she was here in person it would be different. If she was in hugging-distance he wouldn’t have been able to wait this long in the first place).

But Tony didn’t tell Peter that he’d be fine just talking to Aunt May, or tell him to calm down, he just said, “Of course, Peter. All you have to do is ask.”

Which, once Tony said it, seemed obvious.

“Even if your aunt scares the bejezus out of me,” Tony said.

Peter laughed. “She’s not that scary.”

“Uh huh,” Tony said, “*You’re* not the one looking after her favorite nephew.”

“*Only* nephew,” Peter corrected.

“Point stands,” Tony said. “But whatever. As long as I don’t let you die or fail English I should be fine. Even if you did lie about not going on a field trip that ended up with a villain gate crashing. At least that’s not on *me*. This time.”

“Thanks,” Peter said sarcastically. “You make me feel so much better.”

“You’re *very* welcome,” Tony said, making a theatrical bow. “That’s always my aim.”

And as they walked, getting closer to a video call with Aunt May that Tony was doing a bang up job at distracting Peter from thinking about, Peter considered that as dramatic and theatrical a tone as Tony’s words had been said in, they were really nothing but the complete and utter truth.

I can't believe it's over! And simultaneously, I should have finished this ages ago. I hope you enjoyed it :)

End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this

If you want to scream at and/or with me I'm on [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#) (though I'm on twitter more, frankly), or you can find my email in my ao3 profile

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